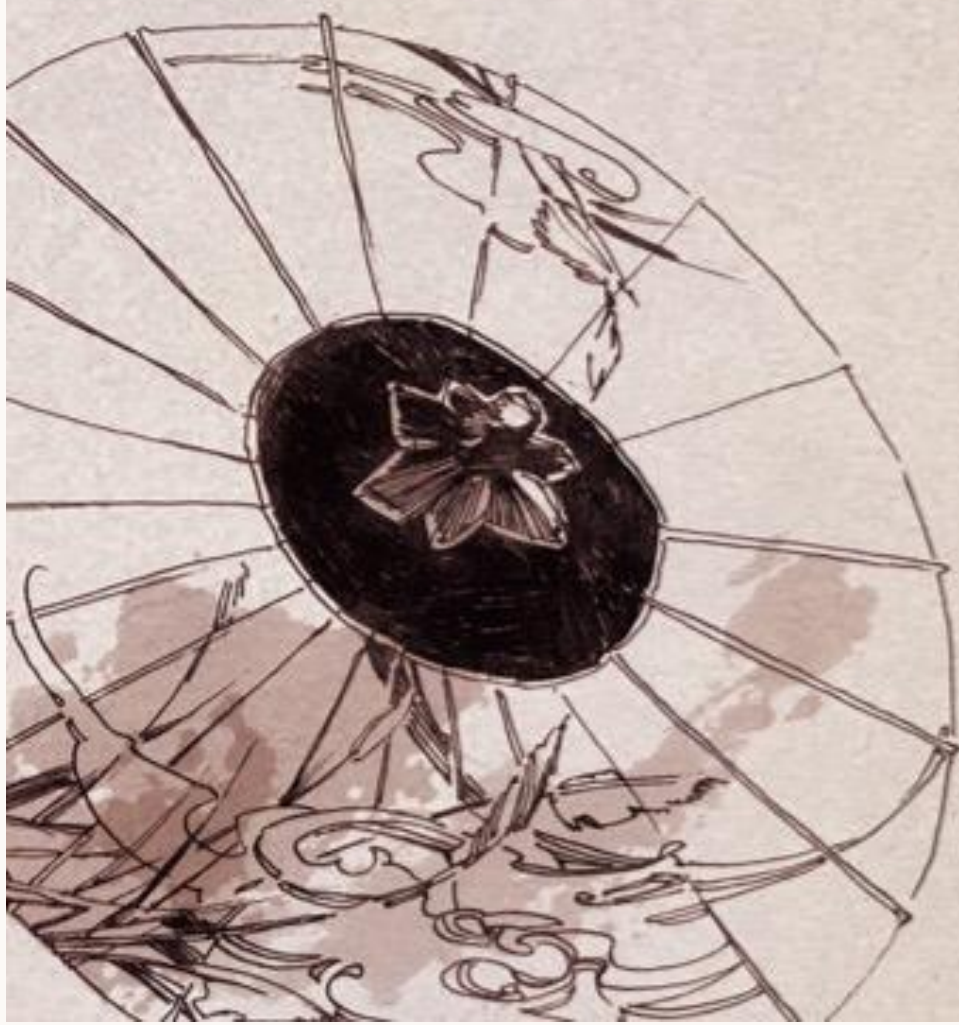


活受罪

tangstory



Living to Suffer

[ENG TRANS] 活受罪 BY Tangstory

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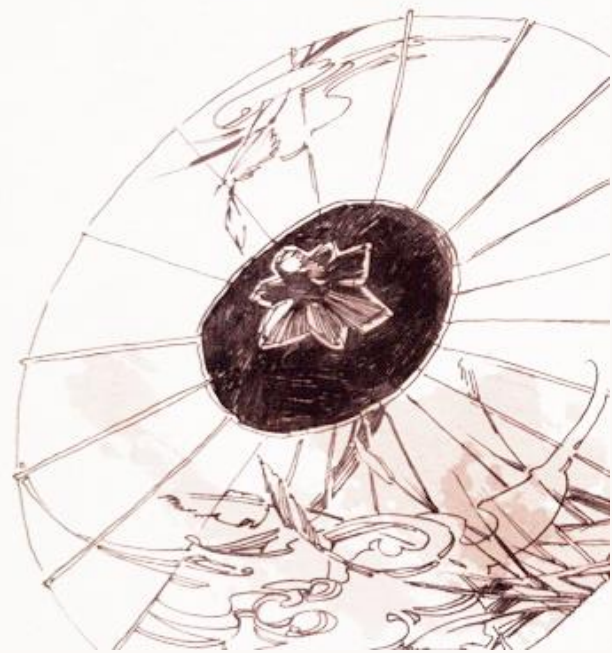
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Cover blurb:

And his life had been but a prelude to three things – a summer shower, a glimpse of inky reeds, and one man.

Name analysis:

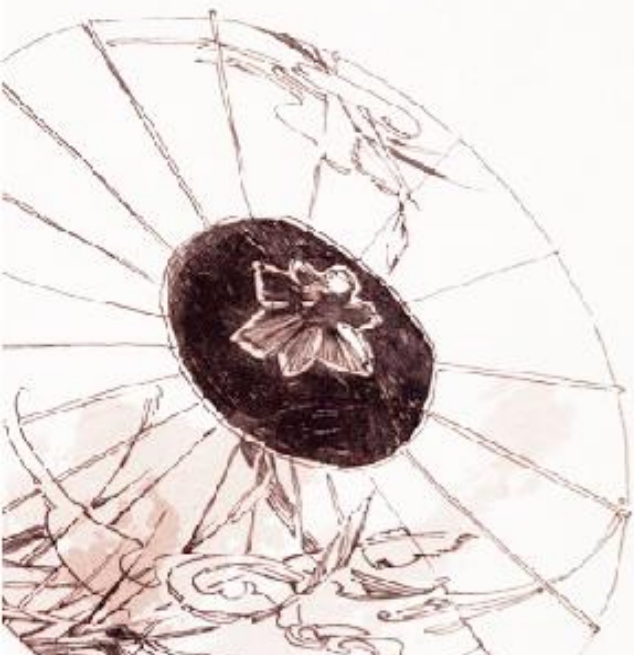
沈 (shen): juice; almost always in modern use a family name or abbreviation of Shenyang.

涼 (liang): cool, to cool

生 (sheng): life, to live, to give birth, to grow; unknown, stranger; raw, unprocessed

秦 (ch'in): name of feudal state and dynasty, theorized origin of the name "China"

敬 (ching): respect, to respect, to perform (rituals, ceremonies, etc)



Chapters

I	4
II	15
III	28
IV	39
V	52
VI	69
VII	84
VIII	102
IX	115
X	132
XI	155
XII	169
XIII	195
XIV	220
XV	246
XVI	261
XVII	284
XVIII	301
XIX	321
XX	333

As he faded in and out of consciousness, Shen Liangsheng caught the sound of rain hitting an umbrella. Showers in the summertime were swift and heavy, and when the droplets hit the canopy, they were like booming war drums rousing him out of his dreamlike state.

The first thing he saw after his eyes blinked open was the underside of an oil-paper umbrella painted with yellow reeds. The art was realistic and conveyed the plant's submission to the elements.

He heard someone saying, "This rain will not last long. It should be ceasing soon," and immediately tried to reach for his sword. Ch'in Ching, who was holding the umbrella and watching him, noticed the man's twitching fingers. He leaned in closer.

There were no signs of human activity in these deserted hills other than the two of them. The heavily wounded Shen Liangsheng had come upon this abandoned shrine and

attempted to enter in order to escape the rain and tend to his injuries. Unfortunately, his body gave out before he could do so, and he collapsed at the entrance.

The *t'uti*¹ shrine had long ago been abandoned and was so deteriorated the door had caved in and was lying askew in the mud. Shen Liangsheng had tripped on it, fallen on its wooden boards and lost consciousness for about half the time of a burned incense stick.²

The blood flow was too profuse to be washed away by the rain. The scarlet seeped into the boards and welled up again with the rainwater from the cracks in the wood. Rich and fresh, it was not unlike a new coat of vermillion paint on the bottom of a coffin.

Seeing this pitiful man hovering between life and death, Ch'in Ching was hesitant but still asked frankly, "What is your name? It'd be easier to erect a tombstone for you if you die."

¹ T'uti literally means "soil and land" and refers to the gods/deities that reside in the local area.

² A unit of time formerly used in China. It is the time it takes an incense stick to burn halfway.

While Ch'in Ching was speaking, Shen Liangsheng was calling upon his core *ch'i*.³ Every pathway in his body was in pain as though a thousand blades were grinding against his insides, and he could not make a sound.

Receiving no response, Ch'in Ching assumed that the man did not want to end his life here, so he nodded and remarked, "Indeed, it is better to stay alive than not."

Although he was in excruciating pain, Shen Liangsheng did not want to pass out again, so he forced himself to stay conscious and made eye contact with Ch'in Ching.

Ch'in Ching looked back at the man and saw no signs that the man desired rescue, nor did he find any pride or stubbornness. The man's eyes were cold and still like icy ponds reflecting his silhouette – half-bent, holding an umbrella with one hand and scratching his head with the other, all while staring intently, almost dumbly, back at the man.

³ The essence of a living being.

Ch'in Ching coughed and straightened his back wanting to recover his image as a dignified and otherworldly figure, but even he himself wanted to laugh at the attempt, which led him to cough once more before speaking in a serious tone. "I inspected your pulse earlier. With the internal and external wounds, you are essentially on your last breath, but worry not, I am not one to leave a patient in need. Only if I were to move you...I'm afraid you might not survive the trip. What say you?"

As the *hufa*⁴ of an esoteric sect, Shen Liangsheng had an extraordinary pulse and *ch'i*. He knew that his injuries were not as severe as the man thought and that it actually would be difficult for him to die even if he were to lie here and be rained on for another day and night, let alone from being moved.

Shen Liangsheng considered his choices. If he were to light his sect's signal flare, there was no telling whether it would attract friend or foe, so it would be best to save this option for the direst of situations. At present, there was someone willing to rescue him, so he was going to let the man do so. As for the

⁴ Usually one of four guardians of a sect and the second highest position in the organization. The term derives from the Four Heavenly Kings of Chinese Buddhism.

man's background and the sincerity of his actions, he would have to wait and see.

Ch'in Ching watched the man give the tiniest nod after some silence and took it as consent to proceed. He then closed the umbrella and tucked it under his arm before bending down in an attempt to lift the man. Unfortunately, Ch'in Ching was not particularly skilled in martial arts, and the bit that he knew used techniques that were highly dependent on agility and using the opponent's force against him. When it came to raw strength, he was not much different than someone with no martial arts knowledge at all. He truly did not have it in him to carry a man close to his own height while holding an umbrella under his arm at the same time, so he heaved a sigh and abandoned the umbrella. Using the full strength of both arms, he hoisted the man up. "Whew, that's heavy."

Eyes closed in a resting state, Shen Liangsheng felt the man activate his *ch'ingkung*⁵ for the trip ahead and thought to

⁵ A technique aimed at enabling the practitioner to scale walls or vertical structures with little or no aid, similar to parkour. This technique has been exaggerated in the wuxia genre to include superhuman abilities like flying and levitation.

himself, what terrible technique. If this was a portrayal of the man's skills as a doctor, then he likely would have to cure himself. With that, he stopped paying attention to the man and the bumpy journey and began reciting his own secret mantra to heal his wounded pathways.

The name of this mantra was The Emptiness of the Five Skandhas. Although the name had its origins in the Buddhist text, the Heart Sūtra,⁶ it was merely borrowed and the content had nothing to do with the *neikung*⁷ of the Buddhist sects.⁸ The essence of the mantra, however, was indeed emptiness. While activated, the ability slowed the practitioner's pulse to a near stop. It was written in the sect's scriptures that, at the highest level, one could sustain a state of feigned death for a century with only the tiniest shred of *ch'i* endlessly circulating within the body, and when revived, his power would be multiplied a hundred times over, achieving invincibility.

⁶ An important Buddhist scripture written between 150 and 350 CE, the Heart Sutra is a meditation on the emptiness and impermanence of the world. Many scholars believe it was first written in Chinese before being translated to Sanskrit.

⁷ A mainly fictional concept unique to the wuxia genre based on the Chinese concept of *ch'i*. It is said to be the practice that cultivates strength within the body that in turns forms the basis for external (physical) strength. Someone with great internal strength would consequently also have great physical strength.

⁸ The Shaolin Sect and other Buddhism-based martial arts sects.

The name Shen Liangsheng may sound effeminate, but he was inexpressive and hard-hearted exactly as its literal meaning suggested. He had remarkable inner strength that made him exceptionally well-suited to practise this mantra. Although he had not advanced since achieving the seventh stage, when he activated the ability his pulse would become as slow and faint as that of a person seconds away from death.

With no knowledge of this, Ch'in Ching only noticed that the man in his arms was breathing more and more softly. He accelerated his already rushed pace as despondency began creeping in. Although they were total strangers, he had given his word to save him, and because of that he could not simply watch the man die in his arms.

Indeed, the summertime shower did not last long. The rain gradually eased up, and the sun appeared in the horizon. The forest, flecked with gold and reverberating with bird chirps and frog croaks, contrasted starkly with the lack of life in Ch'in Ching's arms. He looked down at the man to find his face as

pale as paper, lips drained of colour. Yet, his expression was tranquil and devoid of pain.

Better that than a painful one, Ch'in Ching thought. Man had to go through life suffering more or less. That the man could die without awareness of death and be relieved of any suffering was his fortune.⁹

Ch'in Ching looked up. His medicine hut was beyond another hill, and he doubted that the man could last until then. His arms were sore, and he was having trouble carrying the man's weight. If he woke the man, he would only suffer, so Ch'in Ching made a quick stop and shifted the man in his arms to get a better grip.

Shen Liangsheng was meditating but still retained some awareness of his surroundings. Feeling Ch'in Ching stop, he opened his eyes thinking they had arrived but only found Ch'in Ching frowning at him. The next moment, however, Ch'in Ching pulled a crooked smile after seeing Shen Liangsheng's eyes.

"Only a little bit more to go," he soothed. "Are you sleepy? You can rest a while longer."

⁹ Specifically, fortune that he had collected through doing good deeds.

In his twenty-six years of life, the *hufa* had never had anyone speak to him like a child. After only a moment, he noticed the unpleasant emotions on his face and realized that the man most likely thought he was on his last burst of energy before death. Under the shadowy sunlight, he even spotted what looked like a tear streak stretching from the corner of his eye down the cheek.

He decided to reply, "My thanks."

Shen-*hufa* was hardly a good man, yet amongst the wicked he was a gentleman. Even when taking a life, he did not neglect etiquette – leaving behind a polite "Pardon me" after cutting a hole through someone – causing his fellow sect members to grind their teeth in frustration.

Hearing the man's gratitude, Ch'in Ching cracked a wry smile, hoping that the man was not unintentionally thanking him for preparing his funeral. He felt disheartened inside, but the smile on his face only widened.

Shen Liangsheng discontinued the healing process with the mantra because firstly, the pain had subsided and secondly,

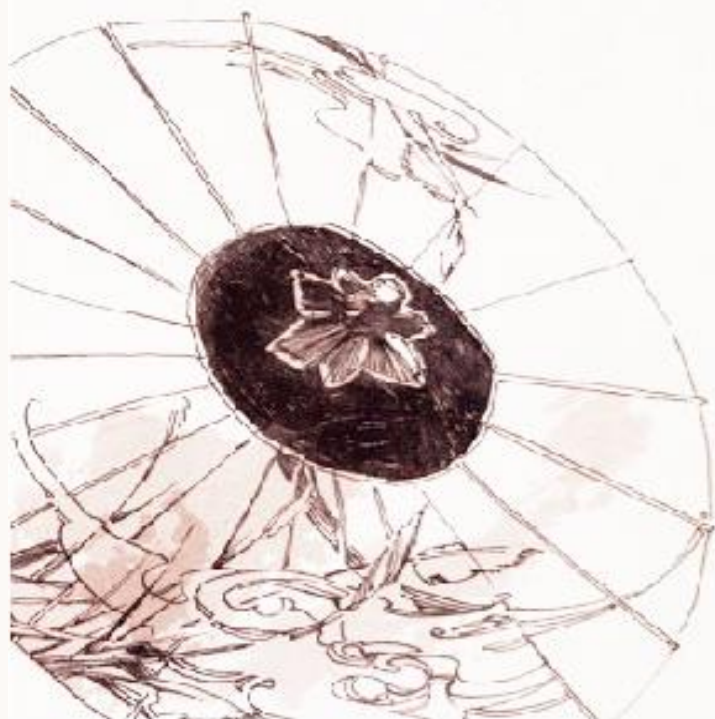
haste makes waste. Since he was not in a rush, he calmly began to study the man speeding along with him in his arms. He felt absolutely no gratitude. The world was filled with various types of goodness and beauty, and also many kinds of evil and pain – 'tis the natural way. Whether something was good or evil was of no consequence to him, for he saw it all as he would the sun and moon, or the grass and trees. He did not know what it meant to be moved.

“Hm?” After a pot of tea’s time,¹⁰ Ch’in Ching began to notice the man’s breathing had become steadier and deeper, not typical of one who was breathing his last, and found it extraordinary. He looked down with a smile, “It appears your time has not come.”

After extensive observation, the only thing on Shen Liangsheng’s mind was that the man had not cried. It was but a long scar, thread-thin and shallow, descending from the corner of one eye like a tear streak. Only under careful examination did the truth present itself.

¹⁰ Another unit of time, the amount of time it takes to drink a pot of tea.

A scar like this did not mar the face but rather added a unique twist to the man's otherwise unremarkable complexion. Specifically when his lips curved upwards, the scar turned his face into a smiling sob, or perhaps it was a sobbing smile.



II

Ch'in Ching, courtesy name¹¹ Hengsu,¹² was anything but proper and serious. As he bandaged Shen Liangsheng's wounds, he exchanged names with the man. As soon as he heard his patient's name, he snickered, "A bowl of cold water, born at the wrong time."¹³ What an auspicious name."

Shen Liangsheng did not respond and let the man apply medicine all over his body. He knew his external injuries were not urgent, but the internal ones would take at least a month's rest and even longer for his powers to return completely. The date was approaching, and the sect was in need of manpower – how troublesome.

"Your pathways have been greatly damaged, and it is of utmost importance that we restore and strengthen your core." Ch'in Ching stuffed the riot of jars and bottles back into a case.

¹¹ A courtesy name was originally used to replace a man's given name after the age of 20, after which time only the person himself and his elders are allowed to use his given name. It was said that one's given name is used for differentiation while the courtesy name should show the man's qualities.

¹² 恒(heng), 'eternal' or 'eternity'; 肅(su), 'solemn' or 'respectful'.

¹³ 'Liang' means cool and 'sheng' means to be born. 生不逢時 or 'born at the wrong time' and is a way of saying that the person was born with bad luck and misfortune.

“If you focus on rehabilitation for forty, fifty days, you may well recover eight-tenths of your former ability. The remaining two-tenths, however –”

Ch'in Ching noticed Shen Liangsheng's unwavering gaze on him and assumed the man was thinking that the recuperation time he prescribed was too lengthy, so he shook his head and began to explain. “This is not something to rush through. I would be lying if I said there were no ways to help you recover your power more quickly, but those methods will leave residual problems for you a few years in the future, and I do not want to use them. You are still young with a long life ahead of you. It's not worth it.”

“You are a good doctor.” Although Shen Liangsheng did not feel gratitude, his statement was sincere. But then again, when he occasionally came across a worthy opponent, he would also sincerely say, “your instruction was very valuable” as he sheathed his sword and the adversary fell once again into the cycle of reincarnation. Therefore even his sincere compliments were not the most auspicious signs.

“That is very kind of you.” Ch’in Ching walked to the shelf and picked out a celadon bottle. “As I was saying, the remaining two-tenths…” He walked to the table and poured a cup of water before saying forthrightly, “I analyzed your pulse earlier and found that I had been careless. The mantra that you practise is so unusual that I’m certain I cannot help you. With those remaining two-tenths, you are on your own.” Taking the bottle and cup to the bed, he tipped out two red pills and handed them to Shen Liangsheng. “To be taken orally.”

Shen Liangsheng did not take the pills but merely continued to stare at Ch’in Ching, making no effort to disguise the query in his eyes. Although the Five Skandhas was a hidden gem of the sect that only the *hufa* could practise, the *chianghu*¹⁴ was not unaware of its existence. If this Ch’in-*taifu*¹⁵ had caught this crucial detail and was still willing to help, then it was not a simple matter of kindness.

Despite his patient’s unresponsiveness, Ch’in Ching was not at a loss. He grabbed Shen Liangsheng’s hand and thrust the

¹⁴ Loosely termed, a parallel world that exists outside of mainstream society and its government

¹⁵ A suffix that means doctor.

pills into it. "Only you and I are in this space; not another soul. Certainly on our way here you have seen the obscurity of this location. Also, considering the protective circles placed here, it is not a place one can simply visit. I have given my word to save you, so I naturally have no intention to harm you. I am a doctor, and you my patient, end of story. It is late now. You are free to stay or leave as you wish."

With that said, he returned to the table and poured himself a cup of water. The dull ache in his chest seemed to abate after he gulped down the liquid.

In reality, however, Ch'in Ching knew that the pain did not exist, and that it was merely a figment of his imagination when he thought of the predestined outcome of this game.

After moments of silence, Shen Liangsheng inquired coolly, "What is it you desire?"

Ch'in Ching turned around and arched a brow. "In return for saving your life, naturally your devotion, body and soul."

Ch'in Ching was hardly a wicked man, yet amongst the good he was a rogue. He was quite fond of gambling and lewdness – particularly the latter. Whenever he came across an attractive person, he could not resist trying to press his advantage using provocative language, regardless of gender. Although he did not have the guts to actually do anything, and this man before him was not someone he could afford to offend, he would not be the bawdy Ch'in-*taifu* if he did not seize the opportunity when it was handed to him on a silver platter.

“You are a doctor, and I your patient, end of story?” The same utterance coming back again as a question in Shen Liangsheng’s calm voice sounded a bit sarcastic to Ch'in Ching’s ears. The man must have been mocking the doctor for losing sight of his promise as a medical practitioner almost immediately after declaring it.

With a puckered face Ch'in Ching sighed inwardly as he looked at Shen-*hufa* lying in bed. This mister surely was distant and quiet but was also very clever with his tongue. Pity that such a pretty face could not belong to a pristine beauty.

Saying no more, Shen Liangsheng swallowed the pills and went to sleep fully clothed. His instinct told him this man would have a request for him sooner or later. That he did not say it now meant there was room for future negotiation. One favour in return for another – deals were the most trustworthy method of interaction.

Three days passed by the time he woke again. The medicine prescribed by Ch'in Ching was efficacious– his core was strengthened and his *ch'i* flowed unobstructed through his pathways. Even the external application of medicine was very effective – nearly all his wounds had scabbed after merely three days, and perhaps they would be completely healed in a few more.

“How do you feel? Can you walk?” Ch'in Ching knew the potency of his own prescription and correctly estimated the time to check in on his patient. Incidentally, Shen Liangsheng was slipping on an outer robe and leaving the bed.

“Thank you. The external injuries are of no concern now.”

“For the next month, you are to bathe in the medicinal spring for four hours every other day. This way.”

Ch'in Ching led the man out from the hut and through a complex pathway of twists and turns. They finally arrived at a pool shrouded in light mist that carried a fresh, bitter herbal fragrance. Without reticence – it could be said that there existed no reticence between two grown men – Shen Liangsheng stripped naked and sank into the warm pool.

Ch'in Ching's attention was not on the man but rather the blood-stained clothes on the ground. He suggested nicely, “You can throw them out if they are not worth much. If you want to keep them, you must wash them yourself.”

“As you please.”

Ch'in Ching picked up the clothes and took a few steps before turning back. He remembered that the man had not washed all this time. “I will get the soap bar so you can clean your hair, too.”

When Ch'in Ching returned with the cleaning supplies, he found a senseless Shen Liangsheng sitting in the pool, eyes closed, seemingly asleep again.

"This spring might not be the best with the hot weather. You can come in the evening next time."

Shen Liangsheng did not reply, and Ch'in Ching continued by himself. "You should not actually fall asleep. The water is not deep, but karma might just let you drown."

"..."

"I will leave these here. Surely, you know how to wash your hair?"

"..."

"Shen-*hufa*, oh Shen-*hufa*, I am Ch'in-*taifu*, not Ch'in-*laoma*¹⁶..." Ch'in Ching heaved a defeated sigh. "So this is what it means to command with silence."

In reality, Shen Liangsheng was not trying to oppress the doctor but was concentrating on his mantra and *ch'i*.

¹⁶ Mother, or in this situation, a caretaker.

According to the Heart Sūtra,¹⁷ the five skandhas are empty. In the void there are no forms and no feelings, conceptions, impulses and no consciousness; there is no eye, ear, nose, tongue, body or mind; there is no colour, sound, smell, taste, touch or idea.

But the mantra dictated the exact opposite. It sought to create form out of the void, generating an endless flow of *ch'i* while heightening the senses to the surroundings.

He felt his hairpin gently being removed and his strands falling loose.

Ch'in Ching removed Shen Liangsheng's hairpin, letting loose the strands. Dipping a wooden scoop into the hot water, he poured it over the man's head.

The dark strands snaked down like swimming ink.

– felt fingers combing through his hair and untangling each and every knot.

¹⁷ Translation from <http://www.usashaolintemple.org/chanbuddhism-heartsutratranslation/> is referenced.

Shen Liangsheng had bled so much that day that the blood had soaked his hair and formed a sticky clot. Melting now in the warm water, it flowed in faint rouge tendrils into the pool.

Ch'in Ching's eyes chased after the tendrils that quickly dissolved into a sheer veil over the soft ripples. Beneath the veil was the naked body of one who practised martial arts year-round, and on the body were several gashes whose scabs were so gnarled they appeared alive – a coiled crimson python whose head rested on the man's chest right above a nipple. Hissing, its forked tongue darted back and forth sliding over the nub.

– felt those hands brushing his hair and rubbing his scalp and nape, firmly at times and nimbly at others, the pattern of which was...unpredictable.

The sunlight beamed down through the water as though it were nonexistent. As Ch'in Ching's gaze drifted lower, it came upon an unobstructed view of the manhood lying dormant between

casually splayed legs. Any evocative fantasies he might have entertained were deterred by the overly artless image.

Ch'in Ching retracted his eyes and decided to stare only at Shen Liangsheng's face while he focused on the work in his hands.

Flowing brows and eyes. Straight nose and thin lips. Cold like the tundra after a snow. Sharp like the icicles hanging off pines. It was not a fiendish complexion, but the malice was strong.

Also... Ch'in Ching averted his gaze, not even daring to look at the man's face now. He wondered how it was possible for a naked man to still look so chaste and abstinent.

And it must be noted that the more forbidden...the more delicious the fruit.

– felt the heat from the water seep into his body filling him with a subdued, feather-light numbness. The medicinal smell was thickening, but there were another distinct strain in the air. The herbal scent coming from a certain someone approached like a faint shadow treading through the fog, edging closer and closer.

Casting his gaze down towards his own nose and heart, Ch'in Ching was determined not to let it wander any further.

But no matter where his eyes were pointed, the slippery strands of hair between his fingers were like an inescapable net in which a fish was writhing and struggling... Letting go in a panic, Ch'in Ching stumbled back. His awakening erection rubbed against his undergarment like a fish in a net – in pain whether the net was tight or not.

But because death was inevitable, staying alive in the water for a moment longer only meant more suffering.

– and felt the hands suddenly leaving as the silhouette that had almost revealed itself instead slipped back into the fog, never to be seen.

“A change of clothes is on the ledge. You can come up yourself when you’ve completed the session.”

Clearing his throat, Ch'in Ching turned and left Shen Liangsheng alone in the pool. After running his *ch'i* through his body once, he slowly opened his eyes.

Hair, huh... A rare, trivial thought ran through his mind as he took a strand between his fingers.

Hair was essentially useless. No pain came from cutting it; it would recover its length if left to grow. But sometimes it was versatile, as the thread used in *hsüan-ssu*¹⁸ diagnosis.

Out of the many distractions of the mind, only the flames of lust could not be concealed, and if one attempted to, it would only burn more fiercely.

¹⁸ Literally 'suspended thread,' it refers to a method of pulse diagnosis where a thread is tied around the patient's wrist and the doctor reads the pulse through vibrations detected via the thread. This was used so that male doctors would not physically touch or sometimes even see his female patient of higher status.

III

Time seemed not to touch the mountains, and a month passed in the blink of an eye. With his injuries largely healed, Shen Liangsheng set off on his journey back to the sect. Before leaving, he removed his *hufa* pass from his belt. The pass was made of a yin piece and a yang piece, and he gave Ch'in Ching the yin piece as the token for their future negotiation.

The doctor acted rather formally this time because of the forbidden notions that he harboured. He hid all the smiles and laughs, all the quips and remarks, and bid the man farewell. "While I will not see you out, Shen-*hufa*, I wish you a safe journey ahead."

With Shen Liangsheng gone, Ch'in Ching was alone again in his little hut in the mountains, but phantoms of the man seemed to linger all around.

When he ate alone at the table, he would recall that he could not help but pay special attention to the man's hands whenever they shared a meal.

Shen Liangsheng had skin paler than usual. His fingers were long and slender without protruding knuckles. The calluses that should belong to a swordsman were not discernible, but with one look anybody would be able to tell that the hands belonged to a martial arts practitioner, one who had the power to decapitate men with his bare hands. A few times he became so engrossed that his gaze followed hand, chopsticks and food up to the man's lips. He saw the lips part and the food being carefully chewed and swallowed, but he was under the impression that the man did not give a second thought as to whether it was fish and meat entering his mouth or tofu and greens and that the man could not distinguish between them, either.

Perhaps a meal was nothing more than ingesting food to the man.

"Yes?" One time Ch'in Ching's gaze lingered a moment too long, provoking Shen Liangsheng to question. The man's voice carried no discontent, but it was more than enough to bring Ch'in Ching back to reality.

"Nothing. It shames me as a host that the food is so monotonous." Ch'in Ching wore a polite smile but was secretly wondering what his mouth would taste like.

"It is of no concern."

It likely had no taste at all, Ch'in Ching thought while smiling. The man probably could not taste all the flavours of life.

Sometimes when Ch'in Ching sat by the window with a book and a pot of fine tea, he would still see the man practising his sword in the courtyard.

Generally speaking, Ch'in Ching should give the man privacy, for not every swordsman was willing to let outsiders observe his techniques. Shen Liangsheng, however, did not seem to mind the doctor's observance of his every stance, every strike. At times relaxed, at other times swift, the moves did not carry the

man's core *ch'i* or the intent to kill, but the essence of the sword was evident.

More than two centuries had passed since the Hsing¹⁹ Sect shook the *chianghu* with apocalyptic carnage, and the event had nearly become a legend. Two hundred years later, the Hsing Sect had not waged another war, but the mere mention of its name struck fear into the heart of every person in the *chianghu*. The horror of the incident was apparent.

Shen Liangsheng likely was practising merely to pass the time and thus did not display the unearthly ability to force a dozen sects into extinction that a *hufa* of the demonic sect was fabled to have. All that could be perceived was his dancing sword and flowing charm.

Normally after watching for a while, Ch'in Ching would look back down at his book, lamenting. Nature's creations were beautiful and mysterious, but no matter how awe-inspiring this man was, he was nothing more than a demonic weapon of the Hsing Sect. Rumour had it that the *hufa* of the Hsing Sect all

¹⁹ Literally 'punishment' or 'penalty.'

reached a state of selflessness, abandoning all sense of self and mortal greed, and obeyed only the sect leader's commands – if they were told to kill a thousand men, they would not rest until all one thousand souls had left their fleshly vessels. Ch'in Ching now judged the rumour to be true.

The yin pass that Shen Liangsheng left behind was initially also used by Ch'in Ching as a belt accessory. Its material was most peculiar. Neither stone nor metal, it was as cold as ice, and Ch'in Ching could feel its temperature even through two layers of clothing.

Late on one hot summer night, Ch'in Ching stuck the pass under his bamboo pillow. Rolling onto his side with one cheek against the pillow, he fell asleep quite easily with the indistinct coolness exuded by the pass.

Perhaps he should not have brought the man's intimate possession²⁰ to bed. That night, Ch'in Ching had a sensual dream.

When he woke in the middle of the night, his undergarments were wet with sweat and clung to his skin. The member between his legs was still hard and his body burning.

Unable to hold back, he reached underneath the pillow for the pass, its icy touch making the heat within him seem even more unbearable.

Closing his eyes and tightening his grip on the pass, Ch'in Ching slowly brought it to his collarbone as a shiver ran through him. In the dark room, an odd smile found its way to his face.

His fingers pushed the pass down over his shirt to a spot on the chest slightly to the right. Under the chilliness, his right nipple began to perk up without having been stimulated.

On the front face of the pass was a *yenwei*, the creature depicted in the *Shan-hai Ching*²¹ as having the body of a snake

²⁰ The original term refers to something that is kept close to one's body at all times, such as a necklace, pendant or charm. This is significant because these items are sometimes given away or exchanged as a token of promise (e.g. betrothal) and often handed down from one generation to the next as heirloom.

and the head of a human. *He who lays eyes upon the creature shall dominate the realm.* Ch'in Ching wondered delightedly if Shen-*hufa* would still be able to keep that emotionless, impassive expression of his after finding out he was using his *hufa* pass to do this.

The pass was rectangular, and its edges were polished to a blade-like point. A little absentmindedly, Ch'in Ching began toying with the nipple through his cotton undershirt using a corner of the pass. A slightly stronger move of the wrist brought a light prick like that of a knife, but because of the sensitivity of the location, he gladly welcomed the pain.

His groin had already been frustratingly swollen, and now with the pleasure from the nipple being played with, the sprightly member jerked in Ch'in Ching's pants as though it were trying to push its way out of its constraints. The head poked at the thin cotton, wetting it with the juices leaking out of the hole. The fluid seeped into the cloth and felt slightly damp on Ch'in Ching's skin.

²¹ Also known as *Classic of Mountains and Seas*, a compilation of texts dated earliest back to 4th century BC about the mythical geography of the land.

His fingers slid the pass down to his crotch, pressing the face with the carving against it. He applied more force to his fingertips and pushed the designs of the pass against the sac hanging below his erection, bringing on an indescribable, sinful sensation.

He then slid the pass up over the sac slowly rubbing it on his member on its way up. Over his underpants, the sensation felt vague and flirtatious and only made him more anxious. More and more juices spewed from his member, completely wetting the patch of cloth near the head. Wiggling around, Ch'in Ching eased his underpants down, and the head of his member leapt out from under the cloth to stick closely to his abdomen.

A sudden gust of wind blew across the cloudy night sky, letting a ray of moonlight into the dark room to illuminate more of the scene on the bed. Ch'in Ching kept rubbing the carvings on the pass against his member as if he had fallen in love with this vague and flirtatious sensation. The yin pass was eerily cold and his member fiery hot. The coolness slipped through the cotton and wrapped itself around the burning rod just as the

lily-white, strong, slender fingers of the man might. Closing his eyes, Ch'in Ching imagined the pair of cold, heartless hands that had committed the most heinous, most sinful crimes taking a firm hold on his member and stroking it. A soft moan escaped his lips.

The sound was rather audible in the quietude of night. Opening his eyes, Ch'in Ching pushed his upper body up with his left hand and saw under the hazy moonlight his partly undressed bottom and his hips gyrating by themselves along with his right hand's movement. The messy, slick head of his member was peeping from under his pants and had left a small pool of stickiness on his stomach erotically reflecting the moon's radiance.

To be this aroused... Ch'in Ching chuckled. Although he mockingly called himself a pervert, it was naught but a name. Because he was born with an unusual heart, he harboured little lust, and other than his gambling habits, he led a rather abstinent lifestyle.

But Shen Liangsheng was different. With a light smile about his lips, Ch'in Ching acknowledged that, to him, the man was different from the moment he knew his identity.

But this "different" was different from the "different" he had initially expected.

What a funny little tongue-twister.

As these thoughts raced through his mind, his hands did not cease to move. That he had become this aroused because of the man induced in him a nearly masochistic pleasure.

He watched himself masturbate with the pass, rub his member with the man's intimate possession, and become so uninhibited, all without even having direct contact, his skin shielded from the item by his pants.

He watched his penis envalley with so much blood that the swollen head almost glowed red, and an endless flow of clear but impure fluids dripped from the hole. He made a sudden change in motion and brought a corner of the pass to the little hole on the head. The sharp pain mixed with the pleasure

rushed to his head, and his member trembled a few times before reaching release.

Ch'in Ching lay back down, panting for a while. He held the pass up to study it under the moonlight.

A dribble of cum²² had fallen just now on the pass, and the milky liquid was sliding down the designs, stopping between the two heads atop the thick serpentine body of the *yenwei*.

Word by word, Ch'in Ching recited the story in the *Shan-hai Ching*:

The *yenwei* has the head of man, body of serpent, and wears purple dress and a red crown, and he who sees it shall dominate the realm...

...huh.

²² The author repeatedly mentions that the pass is *yin*, and here she specifically uses the term “*yang* essence” to refer to male ejaculate.

IV

The temperature had yet to drop as *lich'iu*²³ passed, and it came time again for Ch'in Ching's quarterly suffering.

His inborn heart condition did not prevent him from functioning normally, merely limiting him to weaker forms of martial arts and a minimal level of *neikung*. However, four times each year, at the turn of the seasons, it was as though two masters were battling to their deaths within Ch'in Ching's heart, paying no mind to whether Ch'in-*taifu*'s mortal organ could withstand such a duel.

As the saying goes, a healer cannot heal himself. Ch'in Ching's *shifu*²⁴ had some expertise in medicine, and Ch'in Ching excelled even further in the field. But neither of them could do anything about this strange disease. Not only were painkilling herbs ineffective, the pain would tear Ch'in Ching from his

²³ Early August. The 13th solar term that signifies the beginning of autumn in East Asia.

²⁴ The title used towards one's teacher.

slumber even when his sleeping points²⁵ were sealed with silver needles.

Ch'in Ching had been following his *shifu*, visiting all the mysterious and unknown corners of the land, until four years ago when they came upon a certain medicinal spring hidden in the mountains. During those changes of season when his heart began to ache, he would enter the spring and the pain would become more bearable.

Ch'in Ching still recalled the conversation with his *shifu* four years ago as he lay soaking in the pool, oblivious to night and day.

"If you ask me, you should not have found this delightful treasure for me. Before, I had to suffer four times a year, so living meant nothing good to me. A quicker death meant a quicker reincarnation. But now that you've found such a place, I might just start to cherish my life and fear death."

"Are those words true?"

²⁵ Acupuncture points that would induce sleep.

"Which ones? Cherish life and fear death? Certainly."

"Nay, the previous ones. You said there was nothing good about living."

"..."

"Hengsu, lie not to thyself."

"..."

"I wish for your total consent. If not, I will not force you."

"Are those words true?"

"..."

"This is what you call 'the apple does not fall far from the tree,' *Shifu*. Lie not to thyself."

A deep rumble of thunder sounded from the horizon, and immediately, rain began pouring down in buckets. Soaking in the spring, Ch'in Ching had his eyes closed while resting his head on a hand. Suddenly, the cold rain ceased to hit his head. He blinked open his eyes to find *Shifu* on one of his expected quarterly visits. The man stood by the pool with an umbrella, dressed in black, the same old ethereal figure.

"I have been most disrespectful, *Shifu*. I lost the umbrella you painted for me last time."

"It is of no concern. I can simply paint another one for you."

"Could you paint a fan this time?"

"The weather is becoming colder. You will not be an embarrassment and wave around a fan in winter."

"Hah."

"...Hengsu, two months ago an intruder entered the Shaolin²⁶ Treasure Pagoda."

"Mhm."

"The abbot had made preparations. Skilled persons of Wutang²⁷, Songshan²⁸, O-mei²⁹, and Ch'ing-ch'eng³⁰ had gathered in the pagoda and created powerful formations."

"And the results?"

"Within an ace of victory."

"I see."

²⁶ A fictional sect based on the real Shaolin Monastery.

²⁷ A fictional sect based on Mt. Songshan like Shaolin but on a different peak.

²⁸ A fictional sect based on the real Wudang Monastery.

²⁹ A fictional sect based on the real Emei Monastery.

³⁰ A fictional sect based on the real Qingcheng Monastery.

"Huisheng-*tashi*³¹ channeled all his cultivation into one ultimate strike, but not even that could end the life of the intruder."

"And what of the *tashi*?"

"Gone to meet his maker."

"..."

"Hengsu...the identity of the intruder..."

"I've got an idea."

"...News came one month ago that the *hufa* of the Hsing Sect had returned safely."

"I know. It was I who saved him."

Ch'in Ching witnessed a rare display of speechlessness from his *shifu* and chuckled aloud.

"How comes it that you did not foresee it this time, *Shifu*? I thought your divinations had already reached a supernatural level."

"...So be it. All is predestined. Heaven's will--"

³¹ A title for a high-ranking monk.

"Heaven's will shall not be violated. Say, could you tell me something new for once?"

"..."

"You shouldn't linger on that thought. Let us discuss the key issue. Is the Hsing Sect in possession of the last two pages?"

"They should not be. That the pages were in Shaolin was a lie to begin with. 'Tis a pity however..."

"No need for pity now. It is fine that they have not obtained the pages. I have plans of my own."

"..."

"*Shifu?*"

"Do not tire of my wordiness, Hengsu... I simply want to ask you one more time, have you any resentment?"

"So what if I do?"

"..."

"*Shifu*, I've long forgotten words of hypocrisy.

Ch'in Ching let his smile fade and straightened his pose and expression.

"For the land, for humanity, I have no resentment."

After *lich'iu* came *chungch'iu*³². Ch'in Ching had no family other than his *shifu*, so the festivities were of little interest to him. Rather his dice hand was itching for some long-awaited action. Seeing that *litung*³³ was still some fortnights away, he hopped on a boat to Chinling³⁴ and dove head first into the largest gambling house in town, staying from dusk to dawn. By the time he stepped out of the establishment, his steps were wobbly and his eye bags dark.

The only game that Ch'in Ching played was *sic bo*.³⁵ Simple and painless, one could win big or lose everything, and the delight was all in the transition between those two extremes.

Ch'in Ching had never concerned himself with money. When he became swept up by the game, he went all in, betting and losing all of his silver. He made a '*tsk-tsk*' sound without appearing very troubled at all and ambled out of the gambling house empty-handed.

³² Mid-autumn, or more commonly the Mid-Autumn Festival

³³ Early November. The 19th solar term that signifies the beginning of winter.

³⁴ An old name for Nanking/Nanjing.

³⁵ A dice game of chance of ancient Chinese origin.

Only when he left did he realize he might not even be able to pay for the boat ride home. Then he took a look at himself – a blue cotton robe that was faded white from numerous washings and a plain old peachwood hairpin – and found nothing he could even pawn for money.

Searching himself all over, he dug out a few pieces of copper. Although it was not sufficient for the boat, it was for a few hearty *shaoping*.³⁶ He thought Chinling was not terribly far from his dwelling, a three day walk, and he could pick some wild fruits for sustenance along the way. With that, he began his trip with the *shaoping* in hand, strolling towards the city gates.

The state roads were safe, but that route was longer. After half a day of walking, Ch'in Ching turned onto a tiny path cutting through the hills. With the sky dimming, it became prime time for monetary and sexual harassment.

Perhaps the heavens knew Ch'in Ching was lacking in both departments and did not send any bandits or lechers his way.

³⁶ A baked flatbread.

However, karma did send trouble his way, of an origin even Ch'in Ching had forgotten.

Ch'in Ching eyed the three assailants before him. They looked somewhat familiar, but he could not recall the time he had last met them.

"My friends...could it be that I had the honour of saving an adversary of yours?"

"A damnable honour, all right!" The bulky man who was the least familiar to Ch'in Ching spat in disgust at the lack of shame displayed. "You simple-minded lad, you held a candle to the devil!"

"So you come looking for trouble with the doctor instead of the actual villain..." Ch'in Ching sighed. Thinking this trip was going to be one of relaxation, he did not even bring the soft sword that he received as a gift from his *shifu*, so he picked up a dead tree branch from the ground. "After you."

Although Ch'in Ching had a much higher mastery of medicine and circles and formations compared to the art of the sword, he

was considered strong amongst the second-raters. If not for his heart condition and its subsequent restriction on his *neikung*, he might have had more luck with climbing the ranks of the *chianghu*.

Using the opponent's force against him, turning solid into hollow, Ch'in Ching appeared rather at ease with the dried branch, but regardless of his success against swords and knives, he could not defend against concealed weapons – poor *neikung* equaled poor *ch'ingkung*. Even though his eyes recognized the threat, his feet could not react quickly enough.

The girl who looked the most familiar threw a handful of caltrops, two of which Ch'in Ching deflected, two of which he evaded and two of which hit him. He dropped his stance and surrendered. "M'lady, if you have vented your anger, I believe it is time to let me go. I, Ch'in, promise to ask for their full name, their *patzu*,³⁷ whether they are betrothed before I save anybody else in future!"

³⁷ Literally 'eight characters,' an East Asian concept of one's birth hour, date, month and year, each represented by two characters, affecting one's destiny. It is similar to the idea of fortunetelling based on horoscope or zodiac.

The girl did not hold a great grudge, and Ch'in Ching had learnt his lesson. Although the girl was thin-skinned and disliked his tongue-in-cheek comments, she did not bother to stoop to his level and left with her gang after shooting him a deadly glare.

Ch'in Ching found a tree to sit against while appreciating how proper the pupils of the orthodox sects were. They might have been a little arrogant, but they knew the boundaries. The concealed weapons had not been coated with poison, only with monkshood extract and one extra ingredient, orange jessamine. It was an anesthetic that also reduced swelling and hastened the healing process of flesh.

But coincidentally and unfortunately, the harmless orange jessamine spelled disaster for him.

"Hail to you, Ch'in Ching."

As daylight faded away, the orange jessamine began reacting with the medicines Ch'in Ching had been taking since an early age, and his temperature spiked. In his feverish state,

he heard a familiar voice greeting him and answered wryly,
“What a coincidence, Shen-*hufa*.”

“Many days have passed. Have you decided what it is that you desire?”

“Shen-*hufa*, I know no action of mine can escape your eyes. But I won’t die here even if you leave me be. You will get nothing out of this.”

“You overthink, Ch’in-*taifu*.”

“Hah...What I do think is that the heavens must have taken pity on my craven self...” Ch’in Ching opened his eyes and looked at Shen Liangsheng smilingly. “Too afraid to go to that hellish place to find you, but still wanting to see you again... And lo and behold, the mountain cometh to me.”³⁸

“The *yin* pass is in your hands. I had to come to you sooner or later, so no need for impatience.”

“Indeed...” Ch’in Ching chuckled softly before closing his eyes again. “Then let us talk after my sleep.”

³⁸ This is wordplay based on the expression “The mountain cometh not to me, and I shall go to it.” The expression itself comes from the Islamic tale of Mohammed summoning a mountain that entered the Chinese language through the Muslim Hui minority. A related expression in English is “If Mohammed will not go to the mountain, the mountain must come to Mohammed.”

Author's comment:

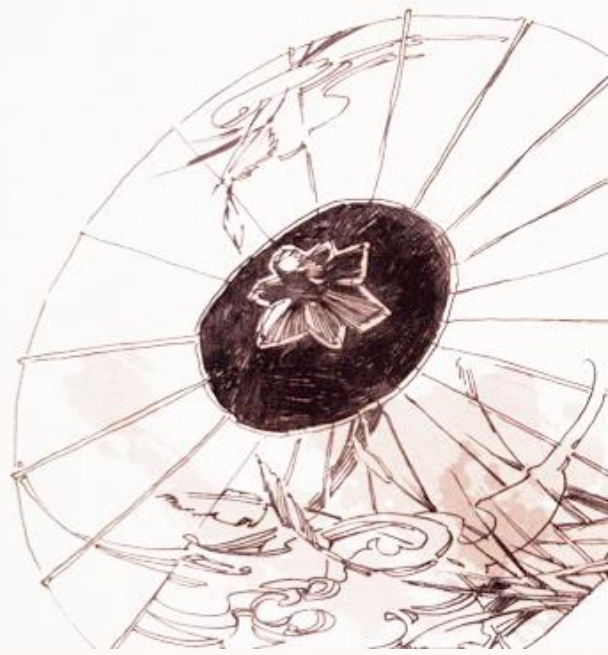
Shen-*hufa* is twenty-six, not a small number. Other parts of him are not small either.

I appreciate the comment "waiting for the continuation." The truth is this story is just for self-entertainment purposes, to fight the loneliness when I get bored. I almost wanted to drop this because nobody was reading and I have no time to be all wistful and lonely. Thank you to the madam up there. Seeing the word "waiting" made me realize I do want to finish writing this.

There's someone waiting, and although it's for a lame story, it's still heart-warming.

Therefore I decided to say a few more words to express my gratitude – unlike the bottled-up Shen-*hufa* whose habits are not good for the mind and body -.-

PS. I said I'd write smut, but it's been 14k characters and the uke has only been able to entertain himself. How sad orz



V

He called it sleep but it was no different than unconsciousness.

The effect of the orange jessamine on Ch'in Ching was equivalent to poison, but he grew up eating medicine rather than rice and had even tried fighting fire with fire to alleviate his cardiac pain. A bit of poison would not do him much harm. He simply needed to undergo a fever.

His head felt as though it were on fire, but the rest of him seemed to be soaked in ice water. He was senseless, but his teeth were chattering by themselves.

The autumn wind ran wild and brisk through the woods. Seeing Ch'in Ching curled up in a pathetic lump by the tree, Shen Liangsheng took him by the collar and carried him as he would a sack. Quick as a phantom, he zipped through the area until he came upon a cave. Then he flung the man inside to save him from the torture of the wind.

He flung the man but also sent along a concealed force. The man weighed close to ten stones but fell to the floor without a

sound, without a single speck of dust displaced, as though he were gently placed. The intricacies involved in this move were obvious.

Hands clasped behind him, Shen Liangsheng stood at the mouth of cave awaiting Ch'in Ching's fever and slumber to come to an end. After a pot of tea's time, he heard his name softly called.

He turned around and approached only to find the man still unconscious and murmuring in his dreams.

Shen Liangsheng stared coolly at the man for a while and then bent down to inspect his breath. Warm and steady. The man would not die.

He straightened up and stood in the darkness, eyes downcast. Beside his feet was a slumbering man calling his name.

Ch'in Ching rolled over in his sleep, his forehead touching Shen Liangsheng's shoe. His arm would not stay still either and crept up so that his hand wrapped loosely around Shen Liangsheng's ankle. He went quiet after that.

Shen Liangsheng still stood there in silence, his face not revealing his thoughts, but he did not kick the man away.

Dawn had not yet broken when Ch'in Ching awoke. Blinking his eyes, he realized he was in another location.

A cave in the mountains. Not a ray of light to tell sky from earth. The heat in his head, which was not a serious problem to begin with, had gone down.

He raised his hand to rub his forehead, scraping Shen Liangsheng's leg in the process, and noticed how close the man was.

Looking up, he saw a desolate shadow darker than night.

After a moment, Ch'in Ching cracked a smile as he shakily dragged himself up by the ends of the man's outer robe to stand nearly face to face with him. His hands sneaked around the man's waist.

In that darkest moment immediately prior to dawn, he barely managed to make out the blurry image of the man's face. Shen Liangsheng wore the same emotionless expression, and

surprisingly Ch'in Ching kept quiet, merely staring intently back at the man, as if thinking about something.

They were so close that their lashes could cross, that they breathed each other's air. Ch'in Ching slowly leaned in, closing the final hair's breadth to come lip to lip with the man.

"What is it you desire?" Shen Liangsheng finally spoke, his tone flat without shock or fury as though they were sitting across a table rather than standing with lips touching.

"What I desire you will not, or cannot, give me." Not taking the opportunity to advance further while the man was talking, Ch'in Ching merely kept his lips on those of the man. As he talked, the lips rubbed lightly against one another, creating an unspeakable, secretive, twisted sense of intimacy. "So I ask for a stalk of *huai-meng ts'ao*."³⁹

"What for?"

"Medicine."

"Very well."

³⁹ 懷夢草, literally 'hold dream grass,' is a mythical plant.

Once the negotiation was finalized, Ch'in Ching pulled back and walked to the mouth of the cave. As he stood tall in the weak dawn light which was just reaching over the horizon, the wild, repressed lust began to calm down under the gusts of cold autumn wind, and his boiling blood slowly returned to its original, dead state.

Soon, the new sun burst through casting its life-giving, fiery luminance onto all beings. Though winter would shortly be upon the land, when the grass would wither and the flowers would fall, they all would live once again next year, and the cycle would continue without end. At that thought, a smile made its way onto Ch'in Ching's face. Of course he had no resentment.⁴⁰

It was written in *Tung-ming Chi*:⁴¹ "On the mountain where fire grows is the *meng ts'ao* which resembles the cattail, is red in colour and shrinks into the earth by day, coming forth at night. Its alternative name is *huai-meng*."

⁴⁰ This phrase could also read as "He should have no resentment."

⁴¹ 漢武洞冥記, a work compiled in the Eastern Han Dynasty (25 – 220) has been translated as "Account of Emperor Wu of Han's delving into arcane" in *Ancient and Early Medieval Chinese Literature* edited by David R. Knechtges and Taiping Chang.

The strange plant recorded in the literature truly did exist and grew on the peak of Mount Fut'u,⁴² and Mount Fut'u just so happened to be the location of the Hsing Sect's headquarters, a place into which outsiders had much difficulty gaining entrance.

Ch'in Ching explained that this plant required a unique picking process and that it would lose its effects after three k'e,⁴³ and therefore he needed to personally visit the site. Shen Liangsheng replied with an indifferent look.

"Do you think I enjoy the idea of visiting that godforsaken place where one can enter but not leave? Yet there simply is no other way." Ch'in Ching brought his hands together⁴⁴ and laughed apologetically. "So I must ask you to do me this favour."

Shen Liangsheng shot him another look before suddenly reaching out, playing the same trick again. He lifted the doctor up by the collar and began to flit northward.

⁴² 浮屠山 (fu tu shan), literally 'float slaughter mountain,' is an imaginary mountain first depicted in *The Journey to the West* as the place of residence of a zen master. 'Fu tu' is one of the many transliterations of 'buddha.'

⁴³ Equivalent to 14.4 minutes.

⁴⁴ The traditional hand gesture that encompasses many functions such as greeting and request, it is performed with a bow and hands held in front of chest. The left hand is wrapped around the right fist.

Ch'in Ching was shorter but not by much. He found it quite uncomfortable being carried like this. Wind gushed in his ears, and his vision blurred. It was then that he knew he was not prone to carriage-sickness or seasickness but *ch'ingkung*-sickness. He managed to find the breath to speak. "Shen-hufa, I must return to my hut to retrieve some tools and herbs..."

The moment he finished the final syllable, his vision blurred again. Shen Liangsheng had taken a sharp eastward turn, not slowing down at all in the process. Ch'in Ching felt so sick that he had to put all his effort into not vomiting.

What would take a normal man two days to walk merely took Shen Liangsheng little more than two hours. Although he had been carrying another man, he was breathing steadily and appeared relaxed when he landed. On the other hand, Ch'in Ching held his knees and retched for a few minutes. By the time he finished he was a big teary mess.

Ch'in Ching's hut had been built in the depths of the mountains, and he had set protective circles at the entrance to

the path leading to it. Shen Liangsheng accompanied him to the mouth of the valley and announced that the doctor had an hour to gather his equipment before departing.

After he retrieved his things, Ch'in Ching shuffled out of the valley and began bargaining meekly, "Well, Shen-*hufa*, the fact of the matter is that I'm not in a rush, so might I suggest that we hire a carriage—"

"No need." Shen Liangsheng summarily crushed the idea. Seeing the man standing thirty yards away like a bunny hiding from a hawk, he reached out a hand and commanded gruffly, "Come here."

No way in hell! Ch'in Ching swore silently. It was just one kiss – and it was debatable whether that even counted as a kiss – must he torment him like this?!

Shen-*hufa* watched the doctor go through several different expressions while refusing to move. He pushed off into the air with his toes and closed the distance between them in the blink of an eye. Before Ch'in Ching could even process the situation,

he and his belongings had already been lifted up into Shen Liangsheng's arms.

A rare blush appeared on the doctor's cheeks. His mouth opened, but the word of thanks did not come out. Unlike his own pathetic performance carrying the man several months ago, Shen Liangsheng had him in a very firm hold. Closing his eyes, Ch'in Ching tucked his luggage close and nestled into the man's chest, feeling as light and graceful as a feather soaring through clouds and riding the fog. The wind was whistling in his ears, and amidst that sound was the man's steady heartbeat – *badoom badoom* – as rhythmic as a water clock, quietly witnessing the passage of time with every drip, unaffected by the outer world.

Although Mount Fut'u was the headquarters of the Hsing Sect, it was not remote by any means. Without breaks or sleep, Shen Liangsheng arrived at the foot of the mountain in a mere two days.

As a common mortal, Ch'in Ching had to eat, sleep and answer the call of nature. Shen-*hufa* never once chatted with him, only silently pushing onward. Ch'in Ching did not want to make himself unwelcome, so he resorted to napping when he became bored. He likely was asleep for longer than he was awake during the trip, but every time he roused from his slumber in Shen Liangsheng's arms, the man's clear-cut jaw line and steely cold eyes would remind him that perhaps this man was not a real man. Maybe he actually was the soul of a knife, the spirit of a sword, the ghost of Asura.

Arriving at the foot of Mount Fut'u, Ch'in Ching steadied himself on solid ground and looked up. A sky-scraping mountain with an extremely steep incline, it indeed was a location that was easy to defend but difficult to invade.

The Hsing Sect controlled the land for one hundred *li*⁴⁵ around the mountain, and members had received news that

⁴⁵ Approximately 500m, but it varied depending on the dynasty.

their *hufa* was bringing home an outsider – and in his arms, no less. Now that was a truly spectacular sight!

It was the first time that Ch'in Ching had been this close to the place the *chianghu* often compared to the Realm of Yama,⁴⁶ and before he could process everything, a fairy-like figure descended before him in a billow of green robes. It was a fair, young woman who flashed a smile before even speaking.

"Miao-t'angchu,"⁴⁷ Shen Liangsheng spoke first with furrowed brows. "You're on duty today?"

"No. I'm here for the spectacle." The woman's words were blunt. Without ruining the mood, Ch'in Ching chuckled and joined the conversation. "And I'm of course the performer, surname Ch'in, given name Ching, courtesy name Hengsu. May I have the honour of learning your name, my lady?"

"Aha..." The woman cracked an understanding grin. "I am Miao Jan. So *you're* the one."

"Me?"

⁴⁶ The Buddhist god of hell in East Asian mythology that was based on the Hindu Yama.

⁴⁷ 堂主, literally 'head of the hall,' referring to the head of a branch (tang) of the sect.

"The one who saved him, of course." Miss Miao pointed at Shen Liangsheng and continued her candid speech. "Our *hufa* is a very proper man, Ch'in-*taifu*. Do not love him and leave him, or else you will have to answer to my blade."

"I..." Even a thick-skinned fellow like Ch'in Ching was temporarily speechless. Instead it was Shen Liangsheng who recovered his dead, emotionless mask and requested with propriety, "I beseech Miao-*t'angchu* to keep watch on him while I go directly and report to the deputy leader."

"The deputy leader is in the Kriyā chamber dealing with administration. May your feet be swift, for I cannot guarantee his safety for long."

"Thank you." Shen Liangsheng gave a slight nod. Before leaving, he shot another glance at Miao Jan, and if Ch'in Ching read it correctly, there was a hint of warning within.

"Huh, he sure holds you close." After watching Shen Liangsheng go, Miao Jan turned back to Ch'in Ching and studied him from head to toe.

"I think Shen-*hufa* fears that I might violate your respectable sect's taboos if I were allowed to roam freely."

"So you really do not know who I am?" Miao Jan queried wonderingly. "Perhaps you truly are a doctor on the outskirts of the *chianghu*."

"Actually quite the opposite. To be frank with you, my lady, I have indeed heard of you."

"Oh, then you are quite a brave soul." Miao Jan had a fair complexion and a slender, elegant figure. She circled around Ch'in Ching, and when she stood before him once more, her face had not changed, but there was a new aura about her that made it hard to look away. "Or are you saying you only have eyes for him?"

"Nay. The *hufa* and I..." Ch'in Ching thought wryly that she could probably build a ladder that stretched from the peak to the foot of this mountain using the bones of all the men who had fallen under her charm. Why was she so desperate to add him to the pile? But he continued, "...have nothing between us. I do not wish for any misunderstanding."

"Pfft, nothing between you?" The truth was that Miao Jan was not going to do anything to him. She ended the seduction spell and giggled, "I was only joking, but now that you have mentioned it, it seems all the more suspicious."

"So it does, my lady." Ch'in Ching breathed a sigh of relief and returned a quip. "You ask that I not love him and leave him, but surely you know what he is like. He doesn't appear to be interested in love, with or without the leaving part."

"Would you like to learn a few techniques?"

"I appreciate the offer."

"Hmph." Miao Jan suddenly closed the distance and whispered in his ear. "Ch'in-*taifu*, if you feel something for him, then act upon it. He might not look it..." Her voice dropped lower and became faint wisps of air. "Have you heard of our sect's *shuang-hsiu* mantra?⁴⁸ He might not look it, but if you get your hands on him, I guarantee pleasure between the sheets beyond your wildest dreams."

⁴⁸ This term comes from the Buddhist term, karmamudra, a technique of sexual practice with a man and woman. In the wuxia world, this has become a method through which lovers can advance their *neikung* together.

The headquarters of the Hsing Sect was not built on the peak, and Shen Liangsheng travelled as fast as he did two days ago showing no signs of fatigue. He had already returned while the two were still conversing, and he saw them whispering in each other's ears. Miao Jan had a relaxed expression while Ch'in Ching seemed flustered with a slight frown.

"Ch'in Ching, let us ascend."

Shen Liangsheng glanced at him without saying any more. Only when they were climbing did he speak, "Keep your distance from her if you want to live."

"Shen-*hufa*, could it be that you are concerned about me?" Ch'in Ching was panting roughly from the climb but still quipped, "Or could it be..." He took two quicker steps to catch up to Shen Liangsheng. "That you are jealous?"

"..."

As expected, Shen Liangsheng ignored him. Giving up the joke, he confessed, "We didn't do anything. She just told me that you were good in bed."

"..."

"So it's true?"

"..."

"Now, it's not like you haven't done it before. Once more wouldn't make a difference, so why not just grant me my wish?"

"..."

"Or maybe you can't get hard with men?"

"..."

"Well, it's fine if the bottom one cannot get hard."

"..."

"I might not be married, but I've had my fair share of experience. I might not be as skilled as you, but I will not disappoint. I'll include a trial period and full refund. How about it?"

"..."

"Say—"

"We have arrived."

Shen Liangsheng paid no attention to all the brash chatter. He stopped and made a sign with his right hand, tapping it in

the air. Immediately the scenery shifted. A dozen yards away stood a gargantuan building that struck fear into those who laid eyes upon it, every block and tile seemingly made entirely from shiny, black iron.

Ch'in Ching stood with his hands behind him, squinting at the giant doors swinging open like the jaws of a beast about to consume its prey. Above the doors was a black placard like any other sect. He wondered if the red calligraphy was the work of the founder of the Hsing Sect, the man who had torn the *chianghu* into shreds two hundred years ago.

The giant red "Hsing" appeared to have been written with blood, and that blood had not yet dried after the centuries and threatened to drip down from the final stroke of the blade.⁴⁹

Murder, slaughter, invasion, aggression – they seemed to leap out from the placard, heading straight for him.

⁴⁹ The character 刑 (hsing; lit. punishment, execution) is made up of two radicals, 开 and 刂, the second of which is called the "standing knife radical." Because Chinese stroke order is from left to right and top to bottom, the final stroke ends on the blade of the "knife."

VI

They had arrived at the sect early, for the *huai-meng ts'ao* appeared only at the Hour of the Rat.⁵⁰ They had to wait another twelve hours or so.

Naturally, Shen Liangsheng would not allow Ch'in Ching to roam freely in the sect, so he led him straight to his own quarters. He signalled with his arm, "Take a seat."

So Ch'in Ching sat down.

"Have some tea."

So Ch'in Ching drank tea.

A servant delivered their meal, and Shen Liangsheng invited again, "If you would excuse the bland meal..."

So Ch'in Ching ate.

These three utterances were all the communication they had until it came time to pick the plant.

⁵⁰ 11pm to 1am.

It was not that Shen-*hufa* was a poor host – although he had been on the road for days, he did not rest but instead sat accompanying Ch'in Ching.

Ch'in Ching would stare at the tea cup but sometimes at the other man. When Shen Liangsheng noticed the gaze, he would look back at the doctor. After the silent eye contact, however, the one to look away in the end would always be Ch'in Ching himself.

As expected, night time on Mount Fut'u was particularly eerie. The sorrowful hoots of the owls resonated near and far, sounding like the moans of wicked ghouls. Dressed in white, Shen Liangsheng led the way to the plants, and Ch'in Ching trailed behind the *hufa*, watching him tread onward without making the slightest noise.

"Yes?" Shen Liangsheng sensed the man behind darting forward and soon felt a hand around his own. Pausing for a split second, he glanced out of the corner of his eye.

"Nothing. Just wanted to see if you were man or ghost."

"So you are afraid of ghosts, Ch'in-taifu."

"No, why would I be? All ghosts were once man."

"Is that so?" Shen Liangsheng displayed no trace of mockery on his face but lifted his left hand as he spoke – Ch'in Ching's hand still firmly attached to it.

"Well, hiking at night can be a bit dangerous, can't it?" Ch'in Ching laughed nervously.

The mountain path was indeed steep and irregular, but it was not especially hazardous to trek. With a torch in one hand and the man's hand in the other, Ch'in Ching could still let his mind wander off while he paid attention to the stone steps beneath.

Shen Liangsheng did not hold Ch'in Ching's hand or pull away either, simply letting the doctor do as he pleased.

"Shen Liangsheng."

After a while, Ch'in Ching called his name out of nowhere.

"What?"

"It seems I have been like this ever since I met you."

"Like what?"

"Holding a torch against the wind."

"How so?"

"The flame burns my hand, yet I cannot let go."

"Letting go of all mortal desires proves a difficult task."⁵¹

"It's ironic to hear you, the *hufa* of the Hsing Sect, invoke the words of Buddha."

"The truth requires no justification."

"That is reasonable, indeed. But what if..."

Ch'in Ching fell silent abruptly and did not continue. Shen Liangsheng did not demand closure either, but after a few steps, he felt the man letting go of his hand. All that was left in the darkness was a flickering flame that illuminated only a tiny space ahead.

It was nearing the Hour of the Rat when they arrived at the peak. No longer wavering, Ch'in Ching focused on catching any signs of the rare plant.

⁵¹ A phrase from *The Platform Scriptures of the Sixth Patriarch* is referenced.
<http://pages.ucsd.edu/~dkjordan/chin/LiowTzuu/HueyNeng06.html> (Verse 17)

However, when the Hour of the Rat came, the black mountainside was instantly alight with thousands of fire-red plants, almost recreating the banks of the Yellow Spring⁵² over which the Bridge of Helplessness⁵³ arched.

“Pfft.” Ch’in Ching immediately began working, placing a stalk into a box that had been coated with some kind of herbal powder, but he still joked in meantime. “No wonder you agreed so readily. I’d thought that there would be only a handful of them, but from what I see, your entire sect could very well survive off of *huai-meng* stir fry for three whole days.”

Unsurprisingly, Shen Liangsheng ignored his quips, only saying that he would escort him down the mountain now that the business was finished.

“Do you know of the story of the *huai-meng ts’ao*?” Ch’in Ching started casually, swinging his sack over his shoulder. “Legend has it that holding its leaf enables one to test the auspiciousness of dreams. That is the first. Another source says

⁵² The underworld in Chinese mythology.

⁵³ A bridge that one must cross to enter the underworld.

that holding it enables one to dream of what is on one's mind.
Maybe you should pick one and try it for yourself, Shen-*hufa*."

Not wanting to waste time chattering, Shen Liangsheng turned and began the descent, leaving behind only a curt reply.

"I have naught on my mind."

Ch'in Ching made his way back to his hut at a leisurely pace, and by then the chill had set in. Before he could enjoy some peace and quiet, however, trouble came looking for him.

It must be noted that even the walls have ears. Ch'in Ching was the first man in recent decades to come down from Mount Fut'u alive and well. Although it was not an important event, some *chianghu* people caught wind of the news and were curious as to whom this famous nobody was.

In actuality, the event that was important occurred on first day of the ninth month, coincidentally the day of *shuangchiang*.⁵⁴ The entire Yichian Sect was killed over night, and the sect leader appeared to have undergone severe torture

⁵⁴ Late October. The 18th solar term that signified the first frost of the year in East Asia.

and interrogation before death. His extremely disfigured corpse was a sight which few could bear to witness. None but the Hsing Sect was capable of such cruel ways.

The strange thing was that, although Yichian was generally recognized as a major sect, it was hardly comparable to the truly powerful sects like Shaolin and Wutang, and nobody had ever heard of any grudges between Yichian and the Hsing Sect. The eradication simply seemed made no sense.

Ch'in Ching had heard of this matter on his way home and was fully aware of the cause. All he could do was silently exclaim, "*Yüannieh!*"⁵⁵ He wrote to his *shifu*, but the reply he received was only three words long, "Trouble not. Wait."

But after all the waiting, it was none other than the victim who came to Ch'in Ching's doorstep.

That day, Ch'in Ching was practising calligraphy by the window when he felt his circles being breached, so he put his brush down and left the valley to inspect. What he saw in the

⁵⁵ A sin in Buddhism akin to *anantarika-karma* but not as severe. It has entered the Chinese language as an exclamation when a heinous (e.g. murder) or undesirable (e.g. son who turns out to be a good-for-nothing) event occurs.

enchanted maze was a young swordsman darting about like a blind bat. He was dressed in white mourning clothes, and his eyes were raw.

Sighing quietly, Ch'in Ching disabled the circle since he had a fairly good guess about the identity of the intruder. There were rumours throughout the *chianghu* that on the day of the massacre, the youngest son of the Yichian Sect leader was staying as a guest at Mount K'ongt'ong⁵⁶ and luckily avoided the misfortune. This man must be he.

The young mourner fell to his knees as soon as he spotted Ch'in Ching.

"I am not worthy!"⁵⁷ Ch'in Ching quickly pulled the man to his feet. After a short conversation, his prediction proved true; this man was indeed the sole survivor, the young master of Yichian Sect.

The visitor did not waste effort on politesse and expressed his intentions honestly. He, too, had heard about a certain

⁵⁶ A holy mountain in Taoism located in Gansu Province. K'ongt'ong is also a fictional sect.

⁵⁷ It is said that a man has gold beneath his knees, and he kneels only to the heaven and the earth, and to his parents. This saying exemplifies how weighty a message kneeling down is for the Chinese culture.

someone ascending Mount Fut'u. After asking around, he found Ch'in Ching's location and came to request the way to enter the mountain.

Ch'in Ching was honest as well and explained his connection with the mountain. He then asked in a soft voice, "Young master, now that you know I saved the *hufa* of the demonic sect, do you think I still count a good man?"

The youth stared at the doctor with his bloodshot eyes before taking one step back and kneeling down once more.

"If I were to tell you the way into the mountain, the Hsing Sect would not let me off easily." Ch'in Ching tried to help the man up, but the man was intent on staying on his knees. "And since I'm not a good man, why would I risk my own life to help you?"

"..."

"Even if I do decide to help, you must realize the situation. You are merely going there...to die."

"I must fight to avenge this debt of blood!" The youth finally spoke. There were no sign of tears in his eyes, but his words

were harrowing like a sword snapping in half, like a cuckoo⁵⁸ singing with blood in its mouth. "I'd gladly give up my life!"

"I..." Moved, Ch'in Ching stepped towards the man and knelt down on one knee to look in the man's eyes. "If I may ask for your trust..." He paused because he knew he absolutely should not, under any circumstance, say the words he uttered next. "Could you...could you just wait a bit longer...If you can trust me, I promise I will give you justice in three months' time."

"Not that I don't trust you..." the youth croaked after maintaining eye contact in silence for some time. "But I cannot wait. Not even a day longer."

After looking at the dead quietude in the man's eyes, Ch'in Ching stood up and spoke in an undertone, "Wait patiently here. I will write down the route to the mountain and the key to the protective circles, but these were the defensive formations

⁵⁸ *Cuculus poliocephalus*. The lesser cuckoo is known in East Asia for its cry which represents extreme sorrow. The mouth and tongue of the bird is bright red and it cried throughout the night, and people believed it was bleeding from the crying. In China, the bird represents Wang Di, the king of Shu who, depending on the version of the story, left his country in bad hands and died and became the bird. The people of Shu named the bird and the rhododendron after him, believing the colour of the flower to have come from the blood of the lesser cuckoo.

when I visited. Only the heavens know whether they have been altered."

Ch'in Ching turned back into the valley and did not see the man behind him kowtow to express his gratitude. He was contemplating the reality that some sought life when they could not live while others sought death when they could live. Perhaps a quick death really was better than living in pain and suffering day and night.

Ch'in Ching was not lying when he said that the Hsing Sect would not let him off easily, and the person who came was none other than Shen Liangsheng.

Unlike the youth who was trapped, Shen Liangsheng was not hindered in the slightest by the defensive circles. Ch'in Ching had just sensed an intrusion when a monstrous, murderous blast of energy ripped through his spells as though they were merely cobweb. The next thing he knew, a white shadow resembling the white *wuch'ang*⁵⁹ spirit materialized before him.

⁵⁹ One of two spirits that escort souls to the underworld. One dresses in white and the other in black

"It has been a long time, Ch'in-taifu."

"Well...it hasn't been that long actually."

"I was not aware that you had perfect memory."

"Unfortunately, I have few talents, but I do have brains."

"Do you?" Shen Liangsheng took a step forward, sword in hand. His face showed no emotion, but the air around him explicitly revealed his cold-blooded, savage intention. The temperature in the hut felt colder than winter itself. "I think not."

"Whatever you say." Ch'in Ching knew he could not overpower the man, so he was merely waiting for his death. If he died, Shen-hufa would spend his days moping in regret after they found the pages and learned that the doctor was the blood trigger they had been seeking all along. The next viable vessel would not appear for at least another fifty years, so if he could still see from the underworld, he would be able to laugh about it for a few decades. It would mean his *shifu's* efforts all these years had gone to waste, though.

A little impatience spoils the grand scheme – if his *shifu* knew that his one foolish move ruined the carefully planned game, he would probably be furious enough to breathe fire.

“You are rather composed, Ch’in-taifu.”

“I beg to differ.” Ch’in Ching understood the sneer in Shen Liangsheng’s voice. The man was mocking his stupidity in not running and instead staying in his hut awaiting the reaper. “But where in this big, wide world could I possibly find refuge?”

“Or perhaps you were wagering that I wouldn’t kill you?”

Shen Liangsheng’s tone was flat, but his actions were unforgiving. His sword shot forth, piercing through Ch’in Ching’s right shoulder blade, but far from stopping, it kept flying until it pinned the doctor onto the wall.

“I…” Ch’in Ching’s vision went black for a moment from the pain, and he inhaled sharply to finish the sentence. “I am no fortune teller. All bets are off. I hoped only that you would spare me a quick, painless death for old times’ sake.”

“Oh? But you’ve got your *huai-meng ts’ao*. The accounts have been settled. What old times’ sake is there to speak of?”

Shen Liangsheng retorted coldly. Then he leaned in, as close as that day in the cave, their lips a hair's breadth apart. "Think not so highly of yourself, Ch'in Ching."

"Whatever you say." Ch'in Ching repeated. He made as if to avoid Shen Liangsheng, but sadly the sword held him firmly in place, not allowing him any leeway. All the action achieved was to tear further the wound on his shoulder. The sword likely severed a major pathway. Blood welled out like a fountain and kept gushing.

"..."

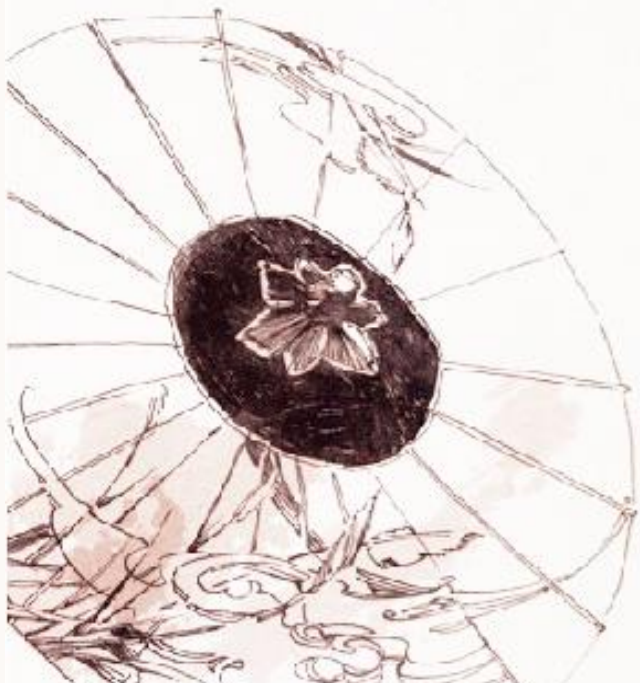
"..."

As the silence ensued, Ch'in Ching lowered his eyes. His breathing was shallow and his face a sickly yellow. He was not on the verge of death but in excruciating pain.

"This is to teach you a lesson. Do not poke your nose where you should not be poking, and conduct yourself accordingly."

After Shen Liangsheng spoke, he drew back and pulled out his sword, putting a considerate amount of force into the move. A bloody mist exploded and swirled around in the air.

Through the light, crimson rain, Ch'in Ching seemed to wear no relief or joy on his face. He only remained standing by leaning against the wall, and with his eyes downcast, he said:
"Lesson learnt."



VII

The truth was that for a moment that day, Shen Liangsheng thought he was going to die.

He opened his eyes and saw an oil-paper umbrella, and painted on the umbrella were yellow reeds.

Perhaps it was his inability to move a single muscle, or perhaps it was the despairing sound of rain; in that moment, he truly thought he was going to die there. In his heart, however, was no regret, no worry. Nothing.

And in that split second, a quiet thought floated to mind. For twenty-six years he had walked the earth and committed countless sins and planted numerous bad seeds of karma. In the end, however, his world was reduced to a tiny microcosm:

A shrine. Summer rain. Reeds.

He did not die, however, and thus the microcosm slowly shrank into a pinpoint, appearing so distant it felt like an old dream.

The summer rain had long ceased, and the paper reeds had succumbed to the mud. Only the person who had opened the window onto this small, private universe for him remained.

Shen Liangsheng had to admit he had been making exceptions for Ch'in Ching time and time again.

Not rejecting him meant silent permission. Not killing him meant he wanted the man to live.

Ch'in Ching sat at the table treating his injury.

With his back turned at an angle to the door, he concentrated only on wrapping the bandage and did not see that Shen Liangsheng had turned around.

His right shoulder was wounded, so he could only use his left hand. Every layer of bandage meant he had to lift his arm which made him hiss from the pain, and by the time it was finally complete, he was covered with cold sweat. His left arm was nearly dead, and he struggled to tie a knot.

Shen Liangsheng watched this from the door. He should have left after seeing the man was alive, but he was still there

staring at the doctor who was trying again and again unsuccessfully to tie a knot.

“Don’t move.”

Ch’in Ching had poor *neikung* and could not detect Shen Liangsheng’s footsteps. He only noticed another person’s presence after hearing the command. Instinctively, he made to look behind him, but the person laid a hand on his shoulder.

Then he watched Shen Liangsheng circle around, bend over slightly and carefully, neatly tie a dead knot for him.

Ch’in Ching’s throat felt dry. Although he knew hydration was to be avoided after blood loss, he still reached for the tea pot on the table and poured himself half a cup of cold tea, emptying it in one gulp. Only then did he slowly prop himself up and fix his clothes.

Without asking the man why he had returned, Ch’in Ching skirted around him and headed towards the kitchen to make himself some medicinal congee.

As if he did not mind being ignored, Shen Liangsheng followed the doctor's footsteps and stood by the brick stove, watching. Ch'in Ching washed the rice, uncovered the stove, tossed a few handfuls of kindling onto the fire. After the rice and water reached a boil, he put in the medicinal ingredients one by one. Then he covered the pot with a lid before pulling a stool over, sitting down and beginning to absentmindedly poke the fire.

The only sounds in the kitchen were the soft snaps and cracks of the firewood. Perhaps Ch'in Ching was tired, for his eyes began drooping down as he stared blankly at the fire, and eventually they shut closed as though he were asleep.

"I think you probably know, Shen-*hufa*."

Just when Shen Liangsheng thought the doctor had fallen asleep, he spoke.

"I love you."

Nothing more came after that. Under the quiet sunlight, Ch'in Ching's head dipped down. He really fell asleep.

Then the doctor had a dream. He dreamt he was young again, crying, tugging at the edges of his *shifu's* tunic. As he wept he begged,

“I don’t want to die, *Shifu*. Please, just let me hide in a place where nobody will find me. I don’t want to die.”

How long had it been since he had a dream like this? Ch’in Ching still kept a shred of awareness in the dream, as though his grown up self had flown back in time as a lost soul and hovered in place observing the petulant cry-baby that was his earlier self.

More than two hundred years ago, an evil fiend emerged out of nowhere. The mantra he practised was strange and mysterious but extremely powerful, allowing him to singlehandedly establish the Hsing Sect and nearly flip the *chianghu* upside down.

Ultimately, however, evil could not triumph over good. Having taken one wrong move, the Hsing Sect leader received what should have been a mortal wound but, because of the Five

Skandhas, managed to preserve his life, leaving the rest of the *chianghu* with a weighty concern.

After more than two centuries of feigned death, he was quietly biding the time until his revival, when he would return with abilities a hundred times stronger than before making him well-nigh invincible. In that event, the denizens of the *chianghu* would only be able to watch helplessly as he brought an end to life as they knew it.

Alas for him, the mantra was missing its final and most crucial two pages. Therefore, the Hsing Sect knew only that the revival of their leader required a soul trigger and a blood trigger. The soul trigger had been passed down to every generation via the deputy leader whereas the whereabouts of the blood trigger was still unknown.

It would have been best if the unholy pages had been destroyed, but rumour had it that the pages included a treasure map. The evil fiend had only utilized a small portion of the treasures to establish the sect, meaning whoever could decode the map would become wealthy enough to rival the state.

Regardless whether this was true or merely a rumour spread by the Hsing Sect, as birds will die for food, so will men die for wealth. Throughout the decades, these pages travelled the land passing through several parties until finally landing in the hands of a powerful recluse of the *chianghu*. This individual did not destroy them but rather handed them to a good friend in the Buddhist sects so that the secrets behind the mantra could be deciphered.

After much research, it became clear that the blood trigger was the key to defeating the fiend. According to the text, the blood trigger referred to the blood directly from the heart. The vessel of the blood trigger would be an individual chosen by the heavens, and as a mark of his destiny, his heart would be different than that of others. If the evil fiend was to be revived, this person would have to be hung up and his blood drained directly from his beating heart for seven days. Through studying the text, the monks speculated that the one chance to reverse the life-sustaining effects of the mantra was at the end of the seven day period, exactly at the moment of a successful revival.

The evil and the good both waited for two centuries for the blood trigger to be born. The Hsing Sect had little knowledge of where to look, but Ch'in Ching's *shifu* so happened to be the pupil of that powerful recluse and knew the art of divination. He took Ch'in Ching away with him while he was still swaddled to rid the infant of all worldly ties, all so that he might test the speculations of those who studied the text. Since he was wagering his disciple's life against a successful outcome, it could be said that Ch'in Ching's fondness of risk and gambling had been passed down from his master.

Ch'in Ching's *shifu* never kept him in the dark about anything. Ever since he was old enough to think and speak, he knew he had been born to die.

Whether it was dying in order to push the world into chaos, or dying in order to save all the lives of the land, his destiny was painful and potentially pointless death.

Sadly, the young Ch'in Ching was unwilling to accept his fate, often weeping and begging his *shifu* to hide him somewhere so

the demonic sect could not find him. He wept, saying, “I want to live. I don’t want to die.”

But as he reached maturity, he came to terms with his destiny and in turn became an unorthodox doctor. With his excellent healing skills, he saved any bird or beast, any good or wicked man he came upon. In his own words, it was better to stay alive if one could.

And thus, Shen Liangsheng, Shen-*hufa*, was saved by him. When Buddha said hatred and resentment meet,⁶⁰ he likely meant the more debt and karma that had accumulated between two people the less likely they could avoid each other. You must meet, and even if you do not wish to – too bad for you.

The heavens played a trick on Ch’in Ching, and he welcomed it with open arms. Seeing that Shen-*hufa* was quite good-looking, he was decisive and gave into lust and desire, thinking of it as merely a taste of pleasure before death.

⁶⁰ An abbreviation of one of the eight dukkhas, “怨憎会苦” (literally, resentment hatred meet pain). One interpretation is “association with the unbeloved is dukkha” as described here:

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dukkha#Buddhism>

Awaking from the dream of the past, Ch'in Ching was momentarily in a daze. He smelled rice and herbs in the air, and he saw someone standing at the brick stove, head down, stirring the pot of congee.

Staring at Shen Liangsheng's back, Ch'in Ching praised himself for being so gifted – he had told himself, "he's the one, fall in love with him," and he did exactly that.

As for whether his love was true, Ch'in Ching thought it was, just as he thought it was true when he said, "For the land, for humanity, I have no resentment."

Someone once said that a lie told a thousand times becomes the truth, and Ch'in Ching agreed with this reasoning.

The falsehood blended into truth, and the truth blended into falsehood. Life was too short to waste one's time figuring out which was which.

"Shen-*hufa*, if I had known you were not one to shun the kitchen,⁶¹ I would have made you work to pay the rent for the month you stayed here."

Ch'in Ching rose from his seat and stood flush against the man's back, resting his chin on his shoulder. He reached around to grab a white porcelain spoon from the countertop before taking the wooden ladle from Shen Liangsheng and spooning out a bowl of congee. Stepping aside, he began eating while blowing on each spoonful.

The taller man watched the doctor sip the congee with a tiny trace of a docile smile about his lips and a shallow dimple on his cheek, perhaps because the nap had done him good.

By then, the sun was sinking in the west, and its remaining rays shone through the windows, hitting the doctor's face. The thin scar on his cheek looked like a tear streak and along with the light smile formed a smiling sob, or perhaps it was a sobbing smile.

⁶¹ Ch'in Ching quotes *Mencius*. The phrase is literally, 'noble men (stays) far (from the) kitchen' and was used by Mencius to describe how noble men cannot bear to see the butchering of animals.

"I do know." Shen Liangsheng's utterance was soft but nonetheless abrupt. Ch'in Ching paused with the spoon in his mouth and then recalled his confession earlier. He shook his head while the smile grew on his face.

"So what now?" Ch'in Ching looked at him smilingly while adding a suggestive tone to his question.

"I have a question as well."

"Oh? I'm all ears."

Ch'in Ching thought to himself that not even Shen-*hufa* could escape clichés. Perhaps the man would inquire 'why do you love me?' If not, then he would have given a cold retort, 'so what if you do?'

"Ch'in Ching, how long have you wanted me to fuck you?"

COUGH COUGH COUGH.

Ch'in Ching was in the process of swallowing a mouthful of congee and consequently choked. "Shen-*hufa*, please don't tell jokes while I'm eating."

But instead of answering, Shen Liangsheng took a step towards the doctor, blocking the slanted rays of the sun, and

planted his lips on the corner of the man's lips, licking clean the remaining traces of congee with slow flicks of his tongue.

"You..." Ch'in Ching started to speak, but the man took the opportunity to snake his tongue in through the opening while one hand slid up to his ear, fingers gently rubbing his earlobe.

Ch'in Ching felt a light tingle from his ear, and the next thing he knew, the man was carefully passing his tongue along the roof of his mouth before skilfully coaxing his tongue with tireless licks.

"I..." Getting a hold of himself, Ch'in Ching took a small step back and attempted to speak again, but the taller man pressed him back into his embrace with one hand and resumed the kiss, this time a deeper one. The tip of his tongue reached the base of the doctor's, and he gently lapped at the muscle again, inviting it to a lingering dance.

Although there was a lot Ch'in Ching should say, at this point there was nothing more he wished to say. He closed his eyes as the evening sun meandered in the space between their faces,

lightly grazing his eyelids and dyeing them red like rubies. The fervid kiss was intoxicating, like a century old bottle of wine.

Ch'in Ching tried to kiss back, but the man did not give him the slightest chance, and the gentle caress became an aggressive offence, stripping the doctor of any ownership over his own mouth. Ch'in Ching nearly lost track of his own tongue and could only sway along the rough waves like a canoe in a storm.

Caught in the fervor, Ch'in Ching forgot to breathe through his nose for some time, and when he eventually did and his brain cleared up somewhat he noticed that the taller man had slowed the pace. His tongue was now thrusting repeatedly deep inside his mouth, gyrating as one would during coitus.

The teasing was making Ch'in Ching's throat quiver and his mouth water, and unable to swallow, he could only let the saliva overflow and dribble from his lips in between his muffled moans.

Their bodies were extremely close, and as the kiss was prolonged, Ch'in Ching's member began to rouse and push its half-erect length into the taller man's thigh.

He wiggled a little, rubbing his soft erection on the man's leg over several layers of cloth as if to beg, or perhaps it was to tease.

Shen Liangsheng smoothly followed the cue, his fingers leaving the doctor's ear and trailing down his back. He cupped the buttocks, pressing his hips towards himself while kneading the globes playfully.

Before Ch'in Ching knew it, Shen Liangsheng had left his lips, ending the kiss, and instead moved to his earlobe. The taller man took a gentle nibble before taking the entire thing into his mouth. The tip of his tongue slid across the curvature of the cartilage before slipping inside and wetting every inch of skin.

A shudder ran through Ch'in Ching and nearly rendered his core muscles useless as he struggled to stay upright. He discovered with surprise the sensitivity of his ears.

Shen Liangsheng wrapped the doctor firmly in his arms, and knowing its potency, he swirled his tongue in and around his ear without as much as a pause.

“Mmm...” Without the man’s lips, Ch’in Ching’s moan became louder and more distinct. He felt as though the thing in his ear was not a tongue but a snake. The places the tongue touched were numb and tingly, and the man’s heated breath was like a snake burrowing, deeper and deeper, from his ear into his heart and then with the flow of his blood to the rest of his body, leaving his bones, his skin – every inch of him – aching with desire.

Instinctively, his body writhed, his skin rubbing against his clothes. The soft material now became a torture device, doing little to alleviate his yearning but rather adding to the problem. He wanted nothing more than to rip them off and save himself from the torment.

His member was now fully hardened, and its tip wet. He made to touch it but only found their bodies flush against each other, not giving him any room to reach in. The only thing he

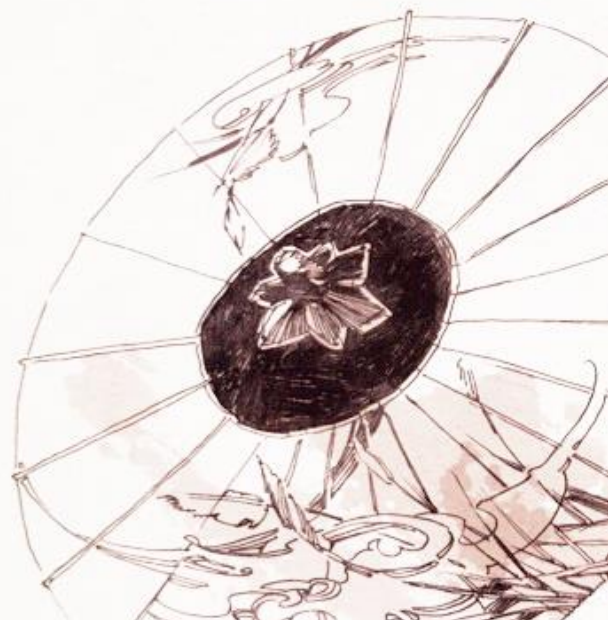
could do was to cling to the man's back with all the strength he could muster like a drowning man would to a piece of driftwood, while he panted and moaned.

Shen Liangsheng, on the other hand, was calm and composed, continuing his game with the ear while letting the doctor cling to him. He felt Ch'in Ching's breath quickening. Out of nowhere a rough shudder ran through the man in his arms, and he knew that he had found release without any direct contact.

"Ch'in Ching." Shen Liangsheng let him go. His expression was as cold as ice and his breathing had not been altered. Rather than a passionate and intimate affair, it seemed as though he were at a military negotiation on the battlefield. "Desire is illusion; if you cannot let it go, you must suffer."

"Are you giving me a warning, Shen-*hufa*?" After Ch'in Ching caught his breath, he appeared nonchalant as always and eyed the *hufa*'s unresponsive crotch. "I can't let it go. You can't get it up. I reckon we are even."

"No matter, Ch'in-*taifu*." Shen Liangsheng did not appear to be angered by the mockery and only nodded. "The night is young."



VIII

The autumn sun set early, and night gradually crept in, just like the light pecks from the man before him.

Shen Liangsheng took Ch'in Ching's left hand and began kissing from the fingertips, advancing inch by inch.

Ch'in-*taifu's* usual attire was that of a Confucian student, a wide-sleeved robe that made it easy for the other man to push the sleeve back until it hung in loose folds at his elbow, revealing the doctor's bare forearm. The man's gentle kisses and nibbles on the tender skin along the underside of his arm created a lingering, dull pain.

He shuffled back to lean on the countertop, and Shen Liangsheng went along and lifted the doctor by the waist with one arm up onto the countertop.

"No wonder the saints⁶² said..." Seeing that the man had no plans to change their location, Ch'in Ching used his free hand to

⁶² The Chinese 'saint' means a man of perfection who is the most intelligent and morally correct. The figures regarded as 'saints' include the Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors and the great philosophers such as Confucius, Mencius and Lao-Tze.

push aside the jars and bottles, clearing the surface. "...that which man desires most is food and sex."⁶³

Perhaps the taller man had tired of his wordiness, for he let go of the doctor's waist and pressed his fingers to his lips, gently caressing.

Ch'in Ching opened his lips, closed his teeth around the man's index finger and lapped at the tip. Shen Liangsheng gently pried open the teeth and slid his middle finger in as well to mingle with the pink muscle inside. He then thrust the two digits back and forth, making Ch'in Ching feel as though he were sucking not on fingers but on something else.

When the fingers went too far, Ch'in Ching could not help but cough. Looking up through the gloaming at the man, he grabbed the man's wrist and moved his hand out a little until he only had the fingertips in his mouth. "I love you."

Staying silent, Shen Liangsheng took his hand back and laid the doctor down onto the countertop before taking his time with

⁶³ Ch'in Ching quotes both *Book of Rites* and *Mencius*. Translations from <http://ctext.org/liji/li-yun> (section 19) and <http://www.indiana.edu/~p374/Mengzi.pdf> are referenced (6A.4).

untying his clothing – outer robe, inner robe and finally the undershirt – until his chest was fully exposed.

The autumn nights were chilly, and when the cold draft gushed in from the open window cooling his skin, the only warmth Ch'in Ching could feel was from the hot breath blowing on a spot on his chest. Shen Liangsheng was sucking on his left nipple, licking and playing with the little nub until it swelled and hardened against his teeth. He then lightly clamped down on it, gently grinding and pulling. The sharp pain, and even more so the implicit joy, blended together making Ch'in Ching arch and push his chest forward. His other nipple stood to attention without any stimulation, and because of the lack thereof, it felt a bit sore.

After what seemed like an eternity, Shen Liangsheng's lips finally moved down towards his stomach. When they reached the navel, his tongue swirled around the depression twice and quickly dipped in, licking everything several times before changing to a thrusting motion that reached the deepest crevice.

Ch'in Ching felt as though there was a tendon linking his belly button to his groin, and every poke on one end sent a tingly rush to the other end. His soft erection seemed to be under the command of the tip of the man's tongue, hardening with each thrust.

He lay panting but suddenly grabbed Shen Liangsheng by the hair, repeating his previous words.

"I love you."

Shen Liangsheng stopped with his mouth and began pulling down the doctor's pants along with his shoes and stockings. He spread open his legs and caressed the inner thighs teasingly.

"Perhaps I should not, but after considering for two months, I still love you."

The moon had climbed above the treetops and shone into the room. Ch'in Ching was lying on the countertop with his top garments splayed on either side and his lower half completely naked. Because of years of medicinal care, his skin was fine and smooth and appeared unnaturally pale under the moonlight.

"Do you know, Shen Liangsheng? I love you."

As though spellbound, Ch'in Ching kept repeating the same utterance. His eyes, however, were fully conscious and locked onto those of Shen Liangsheng with their warm and earnest gaze.

"Do you know? I love you."

Shen Liangsheng slowly reached a hand forward and laid a finger on the doctor's alert member, sliding from the head down the length to grab a tuft of hair and twist it around his finger. When he opened his mouth, it was a repetition of his previous statement.

"I do know."

Ch'in Ching still held a strand of the man's hair but let go after hearing his words. He smiled and sighed softly, "That is good."

Without responding, Shen Liangsheng reached to the side for the bowl with a bit of remaining congee and poured the cool, thick mixture on the base of the doctor's member.

After the proper treatment, the rice had already melted into the water, and the sticky liquid slowly dribbled down along the crack and over the entrance.

Shen Liangsheng slid in one finger with the congee as lubricant, and after a few shallow thrusts he bent his finger slightly and began exploring the tender lining. Ch'in Ching was a doctor and knew exactly for what the man was searching. Miao Jan's words a few months ago popped into mind, and he wondered if the Hsing Sect also had a *shuang-hsiu* mantra for two male practitioners.

He sneaked a hand to the taller man's crotch and found the manhood hard and its shape well-defined even under several layers of fabric. He flicked what he assumed was the head, chuckling. "I thought you couldn't get it up." He teased, but he knew very well that lovemaking was little more than copulation for Shen Liangsheng. Even if lust arose, the man still was in control and was not invested wholly in the situation.

Ignoring Ch'in Ching's verbalizations, Shen Liangsheng added another finger and used the two digits to find the

sensitive spot. He slid along it lightly at first but soon began rubbing the tiny, erotic protrusion sometimes gently and other times roughly. He could nearly feel the erection, lodged uncomfortably between their bodies, become harder with every stroke of his fingers.

Soon the number of fingers increased to three, and Ch'in Ching was so aroused that he was excreting a certain slick fluid that clung to the digits and made sinfully loud squelches.

Without undressing, Shen Liangsheng took his own manhood out from his pants and replaced his fingers at the slick opening, unhurriedly drawing circles but not entering.

It was Ch'in Ching's first time with a man, but because his partner was patient with the foreplay, his behind had learned the ecstasy that the man's fingers had brought – three parts of feeling full, two parts of slight pain and remaining half an exhilarating tingle. Without the stimulation of the fingers, his entrance felt overwhelmingly empty and it began clenching, sucking on and inviting in the man's member.

Finally, after teasing the doctor for some time, Shen Liangsheng raised one of his legs with one hand while using the other to guide his length into the entrance. The head gradually forced its way into the tight opening. The tightness proved a bit painful, so he patted the doctor's butt and commanded, "Relax."

Ch'in Ching was in pain as well, but he knew he should not linger in the current situation. He tried his best to relax his entrance and felt the thick shaft pushing in bit by bit until it stopped somewhere deep inside him.

He let out a big sigh and caught his breath before wrapping his legs around the man's waist. Soon, he felt the length inside him move, not very quickly but still painfully. His brows furrowed and the erection between his legs became a little limp, swinging half-heartedly along with the rhythm.

But Shen Liangsheng was not a cruel partner. Not waiting for Ch'in Ching's request, he began stroking the poor member and sometimes rubbing the tip, softly scraping and toying with the small hole.

The sensations became more and more pleasurable for Ch'in Ching, and his manhood returned to its previous state, even leaking juices that made the stroking wetter and easier for Shen Liangsheng. All the blood in his body seemed to rush to that one spot, and the pain in his butt lessened as another sensation crept into existence.

However, Shen Liangsheng was in no rush and only kept a moderate pace, aiming his shaft in various angles until the muscles around him suddenly constricted. He then slowly sped up, penetrating with deceptively shallow thrusts followed by an unexpectedly deep one.

Just as Ch'in Ching was wallowing in the sensual gratification, he felt the man's hand leaving his member, and so he rocked his hips forward.

In the same moment, Shen Liangsheng sunk deeply into him, pushing into his sensitive spot with the head of the shaft and sending a wild rush of pleasure to his head. His waist went limp and his hips threatened to fall back down, but the man held them in place and kept thrusting in the same deep and powerful

way, hitting that exact spot without any error. Ch'in Ching felt the action strike a spark within him, and the impure flames exploded spreading to the rest of him in the form of a light blush.

"Mmm..." A moan escaped Ch'in Ching's lips revealing his complete loss in the sea that is lust. His mind became a jumbled mess as the pleasure hit him like rain on a banana tree⁶⁴ leaf – the drizzle had just begun, and the droplets had yet to form a continuous downpour, hitting the leaf one by one.

"Shen Liangsheng..." he groaned as his hips gyrated on their own in time with the welcome penetration. "Fa...ah! Faster..."

Before he knew it, the steady thrusts had become a wild pounding. The immense power was the same but the drizzling had at last become a storm of shameless self-abandonment. Every pore of his skin was soaked in its delicious moisture, and his bones seemed to lose their shape. His legs were no longer around the man's waist, and he hadn't the slightest clue what

⁶⁴ *Musa basjoo*, or the hardy banana, is a plant that commonly appears in Chinese literature. The leaves of this plant are strong and broad, and the sound of rain hitting the leaves has often been described in classical and modern literature alike as aesthetically beautiful.

position they were put into. All he knew was that deep inside him a million little things were throbbing, forcing him to cry and moan and whimper words he himself could not comprehend. His member was so sprightly that it nearly touched his stomach. The head continued to spit out translucent juices which dripped onto this abdomen.

But regardless of how wonderful he felt back there, he was lacking that one last bit of stimulation. His erection was painfully swollen and hard, begging for its long-awaited release. Ch'in Ching reached for it but was swatted away by Shen Liangsheng, who took both his hands and locked them down with one of his own.

After enduring this torture for the interval of a pot of tea, Ch'in Ching's face was entirely flushed, and his expression screamed both intense euphoria and extreme pain. He whimpered pitifully, "Shen...mmm...mmm...let me come...ah! Please, I'm begging you..."

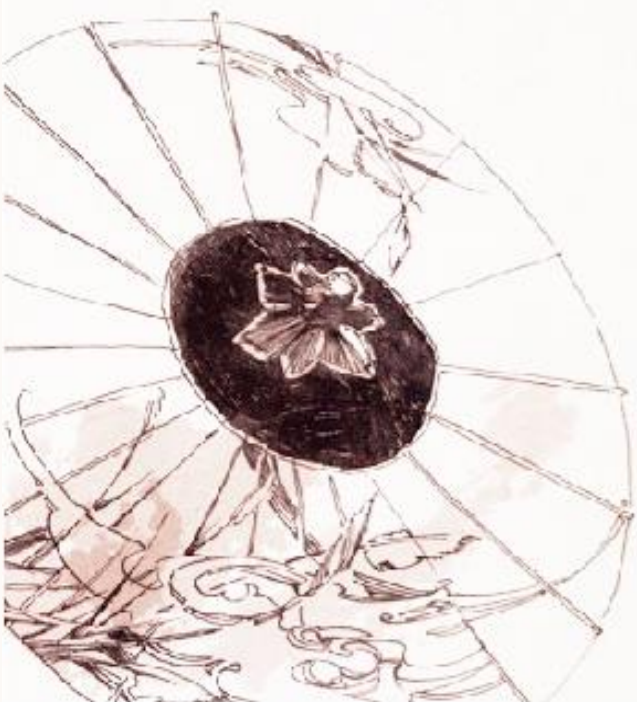
Shen Liangsheng's face had not altered much, and not even his lower half seemed very active in this act of indulgence – his

length had not even been fully released from his pants. The truth of the matter is that only three-quarters of it were inside the other man, but the doctor already looked to be on the verge of passing out, thighs trembling violently. After a few dozen more thrusts, he stroked the poor shaft only a few times before it quivered and shot out thick, white cum like a fountain onto himself.

Shen Liangsheng, on the other hand, did not release himself, only activating his mantra and redirecting his *ch'i* and blood. Not losing the *yang* essence was the crux of *shuang-hsiu*. If the intercourse partner were a woman, the man could even absorb the woman's *yin* essence for his own benefit.

Ch'in Ching's mind remained blank and naturally paid no attention to the taller man. He lay with his eyes closed, recuperating. When he opened them, he saw Shen Liangsheng wearing the same expression, not a hair out of place. His mouth opened to say something, but he did not know what to say, so he simply licked his dry lips.

Seeing the doctor open his eyes, Shen Liangsheng spoke first for once with a small bow of the head, "I still have important matters to deal with in the sect. By your leave." With that said, he turned and left, his figure instantly blending into the night.



IX

Perhaps because of the wound and blood loss, Ch'in Ching's heart began aching two days before *litung*, so he had no other choice but to stay in the pool. It was seven days later when he emerged, a size thinner than before. As he caught a glimpse in the mirror, he thought his cheekbones stood out even more than before. His eyes seemed more deep-set, and unexpectedly it made him look a bit more handsome.

The mountains were silent in winter. After a few boring days of recuperation, Ch'in Ching decided to leave and try his luck at the gambling house of a nearby town. Afterward, he visited a medicine shop with which he had had some business and drank a little with the owner, catching up with affairs. By the time he returned to his hut, half-drunk, the Hour of the Dog⁶⁵ was nearly over. He pushed open the gate to the yard to find candlelight coming from his room. The warm golden light

⁶⁵ 7pm to 9pm.

seeped through the window paper softly wrapping his heart in a cocoon of heat.

Ch'in Ching thought it was his *shifu* on one of his seasonal visits and he would get scolded if he walked in drunk now, so he stayed in the yard to clear his head. Unexpectedly, the door was pulled open, and the person standing in the light turned out to be Shen Liangsheng.

"What are you doing here?" Ch'in Ching exclaimed wonderingly, doing little to hide the surprise on his face. He had thought the next time he would see this man would be after the dust had settled and this man came to bring him back to the Hsing Sect for his execution. He could think of no other reason for the man to come for him now.

"Merely passing by." Shen Liangsheng's answer was mild, but Ch'in Ching froze – if he had to say, he *could* think of a reason. For instance, that Shen Liangsheng returned would not be shocking if the *hufa* had taken to heart their affairs that night.

However, that Shen-*hufa* would take him to heart sounded as absurd as a pig climbing a tree. Ch'in Ching blinked slowly and said, "Oh." Doubt still lingered in his mind, and he thought perhaps the alcohol was making him see things.

He kept staring, but sadly Shen Liangsheng did not just vanish into thin air. The man was still standing in the same spot. He was dressed entirely in black this time, but his face was still cold and full of malice – the white *wuch'ang* had merely been replaced by the black *wuch'ang*.

"What are you planning to do, dressed like that? Commit burglary?" If the man said he was merely passing by, then so be it. Ch'in Ching was open-minded and did not pursue it any further, only casually cracking a joke.

"No, I'm paying you a visit *after* the burglary."

"Heh." Ch'in Ching could not hold back a titter. He shook his head, blaming himself for forgetting that the *hufa* was very witty with his tongue, too. After laughing, he apologized in a polite tone, "Then I'm terribly sorry to have made you wait."

While they talked, he entered the room and shut the door. Once he did, he smelled the rusty scent of blood and realized that Shen Liangsheng was not jesting. The *hufa* really had been engaged in "business."

And the "business" of the Hsing Sect these days was nothing other than finding the missing pages. Ch'in Ching turned to study the man and did not find any signs of injury. So then it must have been...

In the candlelit room, Shen Liangsheng acted not like the guest but rather the host, taking a cup half full of tea and leisurely sipping it. The blood was not very visible since the colour of his dress was black, but the scent only grew stronger by the second. Ch'in Ching's gaze trailed down to the train of the man's robe, and his eyes hardened.

...it must have been a one-sided massacre.

After finishing the tea, Shen Liangsheng noticed the doctor's gaze on himself and more importantly the disgust within it.

Although the man did well to conceal most of it by the time he looked up from the cup, he still caught it.

Shen-*hufa* followed the man's gaze down to the edges of his clothes. The hem of his robe was aligned with the top of his boots and was embroidered with patterns of clouds, but he had taken so many lives that the silver thread had been soaked by the pools of blood that leaked from the mounds of corpses. The crimson liquid later turned to a purplish maroon and made the robe appear to be solid black at the first glance.

"What are you thinking, Ch'in-*taifu*?" After the long silence, Shen Liangsheng moved towards Ch'in Ching a step at a time. Although he had disarmed, his presence still gave the other man chills.

"Wondering how many you killed," Ch'in Ching answered very frankly.

"I'm afraid more than you think." Shen Liangsheng placed his palm on the doctor's neck caressing the Adam's apple with his fingertips. The position gave the impression that they were

whispering sweet nothings to each other, not discussing death and slaughter.

"Unfortunately, I am not in the mood today." Ch'in Ching stepped back to evade his hand while wearing a polite smile.

"It's too late for guests, Shen-*hufa*. This way please."

"Oh? And why are you not in the mood?" Not flustered at all, Shen Liangsheng stood before him with hands behind his back, eyes pointed slightly downward.

"Because I lost at the gambling house. Next time you should pick a day to come when I've won." Keeping the same expression on his face, Ch'in Ching took another step back, but the next thing he knew, the room was spinning around. He did not see Shen Liangsheng make any large movements, but he was crashing into the bed the next moment. Although the bedding was soft, he still felt extremely disoriented.

"Could you do me a favour, Shen-*hufa*? At least take off those robes first." Ch'in Ching must have been drunk, for if not he would not have the guts to speak in such a manner with the man on top of him. "I don't like the sight of them."

“You knew long ago who I was, Ch’in Ching.” Shen Liangsheng’s voice carried no discontent, but his actions said otherwise. Releasing a tiny blast of his *ch’i*, the six layers of winter attire on the doctor’s body turned to tattered threads in an instant. “Don’t you think it’s a little too late for regret now?”

Ch’in Ching’s *neikung* was as far below Shen Liangsheng’s as it could be, and his core *ch’i* had been weakened by the recent heartache. Therefore, he could not withstand even the tiny amount of energy that the *hufa* had unleashed. It felt as though his brain blacked out for a moment but was shocked back to life by the pain in his lower half. Shen Liangsheng had forced his way into him without any lubrication, tearing open his hole and leaving it bleeding. The red droplets trickled down turning into a small blot on the sheets.

“Isn’t this what you desire, Ch’in Ching?” Shen Liangsheng had not held back this time, releasing his entire length from his pants. He drove his thick shaft deep into the doctor and purposely left the swollen head at the opening even when he

pulled outward. The bloody hole was torn and could not contract any longer.

Ch'in Ching was in so much pain he could not catch any of the man's words. Just as he was about to faint from the trauma, the shooting pain would drag him back to full consciousness again and again, subjecting him to an endless cycle of torture.

"Oh, how could I have forgotten? This isn't what you desire. What you desire is ecstatic pleasure." Shen Liangsheng's actions were as relentless as his voice was flat. "Then how about I grant you that."

While lightheaded, Ch'in Ching somehow felt the pain cease and struggled to open his eyes. He saw Shen Liangsheng leaving the bed and searching through the medicine shelf. The man picked out a few different containers and sniffed each one before walking back with a celadon bottle. It was none other than the topical medicine he used on the *hufa* some months ago.

Shen Liangsheng opened the bottle before lifting the doctor's hips with one hand and pouring out the entire container of

creamy mixture. After tossing the empty vessel aside, he spread the medicine, and a little while later, it began taking effect and stopped the bleeding. He then pulled his two legs up and apart before sinking himself in once again, this time pacing himself so that he did not tear the wounds.

Ch'in Ching gradually lost feeling in his behind until only a muted pain remained. He could only wryly applaud himself for the effectiveness of his personal healing mixture, only now it sounded rather ironic.

The pain had ebbed, and the *hufa* was moving at a slower rhythm, too. Ch'in Ching felt the manhood inside him carefully probing and grinding on his sensitive nub, and he could not help his own member reacting, hardening under the man's nearly physical gaze.

Freeing one hand, Shen Liangsheng began stroking the growing erection with much care, and when it was fully erect, he pulled loose the ribbon in Ch'in Ching's hair. While gently rocking his hips, he strung the long fabric below the attentive

member, tightly around each testicle and then circled the other end around the base of the shaft several times before tying a dead knot.

Ch'in Ching made to object and push the man, but he understood immediately that it would be of no use. Therefore he made no attempt to struggle. He could only sigh inwardly and dread the long night ahead of him.

"Does it feel good to get what you wished for,"⁶⁶ Ch'in Ching?"

Shen Liangsheng was bent on tormenting the doctor during this lovemaking session. His shaft was a dragon diving into the sea, turning and rolling without a care, stirring the water until the waves roared and the sand that had lain dormant on the seafloor for a millennium began to dance restlessly and float along the undercurrents aimlessly.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Shen Liangsheng quotes *The Analects of Confucius*. This proverb means a person is content having fulfilled their dreams or ideals. Full translation found here:

[http://www.indiana.edu/~p374/Analects_of_Confucius_\(Eno-2015\).pdf](http://www.indiana.edu/~p374/Analects_of_Confucius_(Eno-2015).pdf) (7.15).

⁶⁷ Chinese dragons are of the water and rise to their full power when in contact with large bodies of water. Legends and folk stories often tell of humans rescuing small eels or snakes from puddles or pools after a storm and nursing them back to health. These serpentine creatures are actually dragons who bless the humans who rescue them, and curse the ones who do not.

On the freezing winter night, Ch'in Ching felt as though he became that sea which was overflowing with turbid lust. His left hand hung lazily off the edge of the bed while his right was splayed over his abdomen. Through his own flesh and skin he could feel each and every thrust of the man threatening to burst out through his abdomen any moment.

Meanwhile, his own manhood was painfully hard, but the tight bonds around his scrotum and base made it impossible to grow bigger or obtain release. All the euphoric sensations he received amassed in his abdomen, constantly fermenting and expanding, almost making him wish the man would actually pierce through his abdomen so that the pleasure could be set free.

"Shen-*hufa*...I said...you cannot give...what I truly desire...that proverb...was used falsely..."

Ch'in Ching forced out these words with the last of his strength before sprawling helplessly on the bed, allowing Shen Liangsheng to continue his work. He did not have even the

strength to close his eyes. He stared at the roof of the bed, eyes blank without focus yet also filled to the brim with desire. It was as though in his eyes, the entire world had become extinct yet also had become a carnal feast. Human and human, beast and beast, human and beast; all that remained were naked bodies, breathless panting and dissolute fornication.

Initially, Ch'in Ching did not want to let his voice free, but now he could not make any sounds even had he so wished. His mouth hung open, and drool dribbled out one corner of his lips until his throat, his collarbones were wet with saliva and gleaming sinfully under the flickering candlelight.

He did not know how long the torture lasted before Shen Liangsheng finally ripped away the ribbon from the purplish erection. The scrotum contracted violently and the length jerked once, apparently on the verge of release.

In the next moment, Shen Liangsheng pressed his thumb over the small hole on the head. He watched the man beneath

him stiffen and let out a pathetic whimper as a tear glided down from his eye.

Ch'in Ching was not aware that he was crying. He did not even know what the man had done. All he knew was the scorching sensation on his groin when hot semen gushed to the opening only to be blocked and deflected onto the next wave of ejaculate. His member was about to explode from the pain. There was not a word in this world that could come close to describing how painful it was.

Coldly looking down at the crying man, Shen Liangsheng continued his thrusting without removing his thumb and watched the man tremble involuntarily. His hair sprawled messily over the bed, and the face in the centre of it was not flushed and pink as someone indulging in lust should be but instead a deathly, pale white.

Shen Liangsheng paused before finally freeing the man. Instantly, a few spurts of thick cum shot out onto the doctor himself.

Possibly due to the prolonged erection, the member did not soften after the release and stood at the same height as before. Shen Liangsheng continued gyrating at a moderate pace and soon more saw milky cum welling out from the hole, not like ejaculation but more like the last drops of urine sporadically dripping clean. He then looked up at the man's face and saw some life come back into him, but the tears were still quietly trickling.

Shen Liangsheng curiously raised a brow, a rare sight for the *hufa*. He splayed his hand over the doctor's chest and began pinching a nipple with the man's own semen as lubricant. He bent down and asked in his ear.

"What are you thinking?"

"..."

"Do you feel good?"

"..."

"Well, don't cry if you do."

"Huh?" Ch'in Ching blurted as though he had only now come back to himself. "I'm crying?"

Shen Liangsheng only replied with placing his lips on his eyes, kissing away the tears, before sharing a shallow kiss with the man.

“...not very salty.” Ch’in Ching burst out in laughter for some reason as he wrapped his arms around Shen Liangsheng’s neck and breathed near his ear, “I haven’t cried in a really long time.”

Still staying silent, the *hufa* cupped the doctor’s face in one hand while reaching between their bodies with the other. He held the man’s manhood and gently stroked it while resuming his steady thrusting. Occasionally he brushed the head with his fingers wiping away the leaking fluids until nothing more oozed out. He inquired with his lips on Ch’in Ching’s ear, “Is that enough?”

The doctor gave a light nod and felt the man plunge deeply inside him before shooting his load, disregarding the stuff about preserving his *yang* essence for *shuang-hsiu*.

The candle on the table reached its end. The flame leapt high into the air before suddenly dying.

In the still darkness, Ch'in Ching felt the weight lifted off from him. The thing that had tortured him for such a long time pulled out and the man left as well. Only then did his body relax and his eyes close.

He could not be bothered about whether Shen Liangsheng was leaving or staying for the night. His body felt as though it had been run over by a stampede of horses, and not a bone was left fully intact.

However, as exhausted as he was, he could not fall asleep. All that ran through his head was the fact he had cried at one point. His lips split open in a dry, silent laugh.

What was he thinking at the time? Ch'in Ching began to reflect and discovered it was nothing sad.

It was none other than lust of the mortal world, but half of the pairs of bodies fornicating before his eyes bore his face.

However, the other half were not Shen Liangsheng but rather people with no face, no identity.

Or perhaps they were not human, not beast, not living beings, nor things with shape and form – it was fornication with fate, copulation with death.

Shen-hufa, oh Shen-hufa, Ch'in Ching spoke in silence. Do you know that every time I see you, it's like seeing the end to my life, but I don't want to let go exactly because of that.

Ah, the taste of making love with death and destiny...

Desire is illusion; if you cannot let it go, you must suffer.

How true.

But Shen Liangsheng, what do you think it is I truly desire?

Ch'in Ching fell into a deep slumber that night, but when he awoke the sun had not yet risen fully. The window paper was a dim grey.

Hugging the quilt, he stared at it for a while before he noticed his clothes had been changed and he did not feel sticky or uncomfortable. He marvelled at the fact that the man had taken the time to provide aftercare this time.

He left the bed and took a few steps. The man probably applied a new coat of medicine, for his behind felt slightly moist and cool. Walking tugged at the wounds a little, but it was nothing severe. He took out a lined cotton robe and put it on before washing his face and mouth at the bedside bowl.⁶⁸ After the routine, he pushed open the door, and a gust of wet, winter wind belonging to the south country hit him. The horizon was slowly whitening, but in the near distance were thick, black clouds that might bring a cold shower later.

⁶⁸ Beside the bed is a stand with a bowl filled with clean water for washing purposes

Ch'in Ching stared dumbly at the sky until the cold seeped into his robe and made him shiver. Only then did he remember to head to the kitchen to boil some hot water to warm up. He turned to find smoke rising out of the kitchen chimney. The thin, pale strand of smoke was like a lonesome ghost struggling in the grey dawn light for a few yards before grudgingly dissipating.

"You're still here?"

Ch'in Ching ambled over and watched from outside the door as Shen Liangsheng made congee. Only when his nose itched and he sneezed did he step over the doorsill and close the wooden doors behind him, shutting out some of the chilliness.

"What is the time?" Once the doors were shut, the kitchen became even darker. Ch'in Ching gravitated towards the only light source, the radiance of the stove fire, and grabbed a stool to sit and warm his hands.

"The middle of the Hour of the Snake,"⁶⁹ Shen Liangsheng answered coolly, revealing to the doctor that the sun had risen long ago. It was only because the weather was bad and the skies were overcast that the sun was still not visible at this hour.

"Winter sure came early this year." After warming up by the stove, he started to feel drowsy again and yawned. He found the stool to be extremely uncomfortable for his bottom and his waist to be rather weak. He spotted Shen Liangsheng from the corner of his eye, so he simply leaned against the man's leg. After yawning again, he let his eyelids droop, appearing sleep deprived.

Shen Liangsheng let him lean on his leg and did not reply to the small talk. After a moment, however, Ch'in Ching felt a hand on his head softly brushing his untied hair.

"You know, you needn't do this." Ch'in Ching looked up at the man. "I'm not blaming you for anything."

The standing man tilted his head and looked down into the doctor's eyes as if waiting for more.

⁶⁹ 9am to 11am

"Shen-*hufa*, forget not." Ch'in Ching looked back smilingly, his eyes still earnest and warm in the crimson firelight. "I love you."

"Ch'in Ching." Shen Liangsheng picked a different response for once. As he pushed the loose strands back behind his ears, he replied in a low voice, "Forget not your own words."

After long, silent eye contact, it was the *hufa* who bent down and kissed the doctor on the lips. With his tongue, Shen Liangsheng nudged them open and captured the man's tongue, but he did not advance farther, only locking the tips of the tongues in a sensual game. In the quiet gloaming, the shallow kiss seemed to hold an intangible intimacy.

The abrupt cry of a bird from the yard broke the tranquility. Immediately, Shen Liangsheng drew back and walked to the main hut, not returning for some time. Ch'in Ching guessed the man had sent out a smoke signal that summoned the Hsing Sect's messenger bird, and when he returned to the main hut as well, it was as he had predicted. Shen Liangsheng was

standing at the desk writing something with borrowed ink and paper. On the edge of the desk perched a small falcon that twisted its head to study Ch'in Ching with its apparently intelligent, black, beady eyes when he entered.

Given his discretion, Ch'in Ching did not peek and only walked to the small room attached to the main room. He found a new set of bedding to switch out the utter mess that was on the bed.

"It's fine if you have matters to tend to," Ch'in Ching said as he spread a new cover over the quilt. "Looks like it will rain soon. How about you take an umbrella with you?"

"No need." Shen Liangsheng replaced the brush and folded the rice paper small before slipping it into the tube on the falcon's leg. He walked to the yard to let the bird go, and when he returned, he had with him a bowl of hot congee. He saw the doctor had already undressed and gotten into bed, wrapping himself in the quilt and leaning against the headboard, so he commanded flatly, "Eat before you sleep."

"I'm not sleeping." Ch'in Ching took the congee and spoke between bites. "It's too cold outside, so forgive me for not seeing you out. If you have time..." He looked up at Shen Liangsheng's face, but as expected he could not discern anything. "Come again when you have time."

"I've sent a message." The taller man also sat down on the bed and watched the doctor eat. "I shall leave in the evening."

"But the roads are rough at night."

"It won't matter once I become familiar with them."

Ch'in Ching only wanted to make small talk, but he noticed the implied meaning behind the *hufa's* words. He glanced up thinking it was too tricky to find a decent response, so in the end he stuck the spoon near the man's mouth. "Want some?"

Surprisingly, Shen Liangsheng opened his mouth and ate the spoonful. Ch'in Ching watched his thin lips open and close and could not help but lean in and steal a kiss. After taking advantage of the *hufa*, he acted oblivious and innocent, his sly smile making him look like a player in scholars' gown.

When the two men finished the congee together, one spoonful each at a time, Shen Liangsheng took the bowl and placed it on the table. By the time he turned back around, Ch'in Ching had scooted back, clearing a space for him, and was patting the bedding. There was a crooked smile on his face, a prime example of a little man feeling grand. "Care to join me?"

Ch'in Ching's bed was quite large, having a roof and a canopy, and there was more than enough room for two men. At the head of the bed was a row of hidden drawers that held some books for casual bedtime reading.

Ch'in Ching pulled open a drawer and took out a few at random while Shen Liangsheng removed his boots and got into bed. The latter leaned back against the headboard and pulled the doctor into his arms, man and quilt in one bundle. The two each picked a book and began to read, the air about them calm and soothing for once.

Before long, it began raining but not heavily. The sound of the drizzle was audible only because it was so quiet inside. A volcanic glass lamp stood on the headboard. Ch'in Ching had

especially requested it from his *shifu* so he could read at night. The glass shade was ground very thinly and glowed with a light amber ombré. Several crab-apple flowers were carved at the bottom where the colour was the darkest, and in the candlelight they gave off a tinge of sensuality.⁷⁰

The bitter wind and icy rain could not intrude into this space. Snug and warm in a thick quilt, Ch'in Ching had a beauty in his arms...no, was being held in a beauty's arms, leisurely flipping through a book on some dynasty from centuries ago.

On the other hand, Shen Liangsheng had in his hand a book on circles and formations. It should not have been a casual read but for some reason had been placed in the drawers by the doctor. After reading the first pages, it slowly dawned on the *hufa* – Ch'in Ching likely had read this frequently in his childhood, judging from the occasional lines of handwriting in

⁷⁰ Crabapple flowers, 海棠花, are among the most beloved flowers in China and were often found in the imperial gardens along with the Yulan magnolia, moutan peony and osmanthus. Many poems and songs of praise and admiration can be found throughout Chinese history, but perhaps the most famous story is Emperor Xuanzong of Tang (685 – 762) comparing the sleeping face of his most beloved concubine, Imperial Consort Yang, who is regarded as one of the Four Beauties of China, with the crabapple flower.

the blank margins. They were not proper notes but rather stray thoughts.

"Rain for three days. When will the sun come out? *Hsiao*⁷¹-Rong said she wanted to go lotus-watching. Afraid she will forget if this rain continues any longer."

"A'Mao next door gave birth to a litter of pups. Want to ask for one to raise. *Shifu* won't let me. Stubborn old geezer."

"Told *Hsiao*-Rong. She said she will take care of it if I ask for one, but her mom said no, too."

"Knew I should not go out when the date is near, but could not help myself. *Hsiao*-Rong was beside me when the attack happened. Scared the wits out of her. Told her this illness is like the blood that girls get. When it comes, it comes. When it's gone, everything is fine. Ended up getting scolded by her, though. What did I ever do?"

"*Shifu* grounded me for two months because of what I did. O Buddha, please rescue me."

⁷¹ A prefix for someone younger or equal in status to you and expresses familiarity.

"Sneaked out to find *Hsiao*-Rong but was caught by *Shifu* before I made it out of the alley. Now it's three months. Shit."

"I think I might be in love with *Hsiao*-Rong. Curses. Now I'm really in shit."

Shen Liangsheng flipped through page by page. After nearly the time of a burned incense stick, Ch'in Ching turned to talk and spotted the handwriting on the page. He paused as though he just remembered the existence of this book in the drawer. He shook his head while chuckling quietly. "That's from ten years ago. How embarrassing for you to see."

"How old were you?" Gaze not leaving the book, Shen Liangsheng flipped over another page and asked nonchalantly.

"Fourteen? Maybe fifteen."

"What happened afterward?"

The doctor did not understand, so Shen Liangsheng pointed a finger at '*Hsiao*-Rong' and glanced at him obliquely.

"Nothing happened. *Shifu* and I moved away, and I never saw her again."

"Do you feel regret? She was your childhood sweetheart."

"Hah, are you jealous, Shen-*hufa*?" Ch'in Ching shot an amused look at the man. "There was a reason, of course. I won't live very long, so I shouldn't waste a fair maiden's time."

Hearing this, Shen Liangsheng put the book down to observe the doctor's expression, but he found no trace of sadness, as though he were not discussing his own death.

"Because of your illness?"

"Something like that."

"No cure?"

"There wasn't one, but one might exist now." Ch'in Ching also put down his book and sat up straighter in the man's embrace. He said while looking at the man, "I asked you for a stalk of *huai-meng ts'ao* to find one."

"Mhm." Shen Liangsheng's expression was mild, more befitting the situation where the topic of discussion was a complete stranger.

"Shen-*hufa*, your reaction truly breaks my heart." Ch'in Ching leaned in, joking. "Or are you saying you wish my death could come early so that you can find a new husband sooner?"

"Ch'in-*taifu*." The taller man pulled him back close and slid his left hand underneath the quilt to tap the doctor's butt lightly. "'Tis not wise to forget the pain after the wound heals."

Ch'in Ching was reminded of his suffering the previous night and his expression stiffened. Too afraid to be cheeky any longer, he flipped open the book and resumed reading.

He was now well-behaved, but Shen Liangsheng's hand not so much. It remained under the sheets and began by caressing the doctor's thigh over his pants before moving upwards to his abdomen, slowly massaging over the undershirt.

At first, Ch'in Ching only felt the comfort of the massage, so he relaxed and let the man work until the man parted his shirt and touched his bare skin. Fingers sliding around his waist, the doctor realized the impending danger and put down his book in a hurry. Holding the man's hand down, he said with a frown,

"Actually, Shen-*hufa*, my wound has not healed quite yet. It still hurts, you see."

"Don't move." Shen Liangsheng whispered in his ear. "I'm just going to touch. Nothing else."

"..." They had explored what was permitted and what was taboo to the point that Ch'in Ching's body held no more secrets, yet his cheeks still flushed at the relatively mild phrase. And soon, the peach red migrated all the way to his ears.

Perhaps since he had verbalized his intentions, Shen Liangsheng began to let his hand act freely. And since clothing was a hindrance, he opted to strip the doctor clean in the sheets, pulling out the shirt and pants and tossing them aside.

Ch'in Ching's only reaction to his undergarments slowly being dragged off and thrown out in an indescribably erotic manner was his cheeks turning a deeper shade of red. He marvelled at how a seemingly proper, chaste man could be so...

So...what exactly? But not even the smart, cheeky Ch'in-*taifu* could find the right description now.

“Looks, average. The skin, however, exceptional.”

Shen Liangsheng’s hand wandered leisurely over the naked body – the nipples, the waist, the cheeks, the thighs. Ch’in Ching could not see the man’s movement through the thick quilt, but he could feel very clearly where his hand was going, the amount of pressure applied to each caress and the faint tingles. The member that had been tormented the night before was gradually reacting to the stimulation, and his breathing hastened as well.

“Even this part is soft and silky, like that of a virgin.”

Shen Liangsheng had touched every piece of skin he could possibly touch and knew very well that the doctor was aroused. His open palm slid down to his crotch and closed around the member. Shortly after some gentle strokes, it completely hardened. Although it was not as thick or long as his own, it was nothing to ignore. The straight length was delicate and silky to the touch like the skin of a baby, and the tiny hole on top was already a little damp.

“...nonsense.”

Ch'in Ching was responding to “like that of a virgin,” but Shen Liangsheng misunderstood on purpose, breathing in his ear. “If you don't believe me, Ch'in-*taifu*, see for yourself.”

Before the utterance came to an end, Ch'in Ching's left hand that was outside the quilt was led back under the sheets by a hand of Shen Liangsheng and, partly by force and partly by persuasion, began touching his own chest, repeatedly rubbing over his nipples before sliding down together to hold the hard shaft. After stroking a while, the *hufa's* hand left to roam down to the sac and cup the two globes.

Aroused by the man and unable to stop himself now, Ch'in Ching continued his stroking while the man massaged his sac. Exploding with pleasure, he reached release in less a pot of tea's time, dirtying the brand new sheets.

While Ch'in Ching was flushed red and panting, Shen Liangsheng appeared undisturbed. The latter began fondling

instead the doctor's nipples, switching between one and the other, as if the two nubs were his personal playthings.

"Say, don't you ever undress when you have sex?"

After catching his breath, Ch'in Ching sat up straight escaping the man's hand and looked at him as he questioned. He did not wait for the answer, however, and dipped down to latch onto the knot on his belt with his teeth and pulled it apart.

"You know, I've been thinking about stripping you naked for a long time now."

Thinking to himself what the great saint once said, 'tis impolite not to reciprocate, Ch'in Ching worked on taking off Shen Liangsheng's outer robe while teasing verbally. All the while, he kept eye contact with the man so that he could abort should danger present itself. That was the disadvantage of being the weaker – only those with power and leverage could toy with and pick on beauties as they wished.

Shen Liangsheng was much hardier against the cold than the average person, only donning a single layer underneath his outer robe even in winter. Ch'in Ching's hand paused at the

knot buttons and continued after he spotted no objection on the man's face. When the man's tight, bare chest came to sight, his heart skipped a beat.

Next, he took off the man's underpants, and out jumped the culprit that was twice responsible for his torturous ecstasy. Under the volcanic glass lamplight, its head was red, swollen and leaking, announcing its prolonged arousal.

"And here I thought you were in control..." Ch'in Ching flicked the member lightly, chuckling. "I didn't notice it through the quilt, but I bet it's been hard for quite a while, huh?"

Shen Liangsheng only looked back at him steadily, but Ch'in Ching kept pushing at his limits, teasing in the man's ear, "I thought that mantra of yours requires much inner strength and control? What's wrong now?"

"How about instead of talking, Ch'in Ching, you use that mouth of yours to do something else?"

When it came to the battle of the tongue, Shen Liangsheng had never let Ch'in Ching take an easy victory. Once again, he

easily silenced the doctor with a single utterance. The latter faltered and bit his lips, asking, "Do you really want it?"

Shen Liangsheng did not answer, but his action spoke loud and clear. Holding the doctor's head, he pressed it downward.

Ch'in Ching let the man guide him down to that monstrosity. When it came too close, he closed his eyes and let it into his mouth, but he could only fit half of it before it touched the base of his tongue.

Ch'in Ching only held it in his mouth, and Shen Liangsheng did not rush him, either. After giving the doctor some time to get used to it, he guided his head back and forth.

The shaft was truly not of usual size, so much so that Ch'in Ching's cheeks were stretched and sore, leaving no room to suck. He managed to wiggle his tongue to slide it against the length as he tried to provide some suction. At times, he could lick the tiny hole and taste the salty, musky flavour of the man's fluid. He did not feel disgusted at all and even swallowed it along with his own saliva while gazing at the man.

Under the lamplight, Shen Liangsheng's brows were slightly furrowed and his eyes partly lidded. With his tall nose and thin lips, his countenance belonged to one lacking in emotion and desire but presently revealed a hint of arousal, which made Ch'in Ching's heart skip another beat. He was the one serving another man with his mouth, but he couldn't help his own member feeling excited as well.

The man showed absolutely no sign of release even when Ch'in Ching's cheeks were too sore to continue, so he could only abandon the task and crawl up to speak near the man's ear. "Shen-*hufa*, it appears impossible for my mouth to complete the job..." A pause, and then he pressed his voice lower, speaking at a nearly inaudible volume, "Could you do it with your own hand? I've always wanted to watch you."

Opening his eyes to the request, Shen Liangsheng put on a rare, ambiguous half-smile and replied lightly, "Since you want to so badly, take a good look."

With that said, Shen Liangsheng actually took hold of his own member and began calmly stroking under the doctor's gaze. He watched the naked man kneeling before him begin to get hard again and, apparently impatient, soon lean in putting his renewed erection against his hand, quietly requesting, "Help me, too."

Shen Liangsheng circled his free arm around the doctor and pressed their bodies together, chest to chest, shaft to shaft. Back and forth the two members rubbed against one another, one head wetting the other.

Hugging the taller man, Ch'in Ching moaned quiet sweet nothings in the man's ear. "Your...feels so nice...like this..."

"Oh?" With raised brows, Shen Liangsheng reached around the doctor and slipped a finger in with the ointment as lubrication. "Doesn't it feel better inside you?"

"You'd better not..." Ch'in Ching snapped back to reality after the threatening remark. "We can discuss this n-next time."

"You should've considered that before you tempted me. It's too late to play innocent now. Ch'in Ching, you're bound to cause trouble with that reckless attitude of yours."

Strangely, Ch'in Ching did not reply after the utterance but instead looked back at him with a smile. Only after a long time did he speak. "It's not often I hear you say so many words." He paused and then added, "I love you."

Shen Liangsheng held his gaze but remained silent still and sped his hands. He stroked their lengths together in his left hand while he slid a finger of the other hand in and out of Ch'in Ching, scratching a certain sensitive nub from time to time. Very soon he pushed the doctor to his climax, but perhaps because of overindulgence, there was little ejaculate and Ch'in Ching was left limp and panting on the taller man's chest.

"You're thinner than when I met you." Shen Liangsheng was still fully erect but seemed not to be in a rush. He brushed the doctor's back and traced the protruding shoulder blades.

“Yeah. Maybe soon I’ll be on my way to enlightenment and the other world. Would you like me to take you along?”

“Ch’in Ching.” But Shen Liangsheng responded with an unrelated question. “You keep mentioning love, but why are you not worried this time that you might waste somebody’s time?”

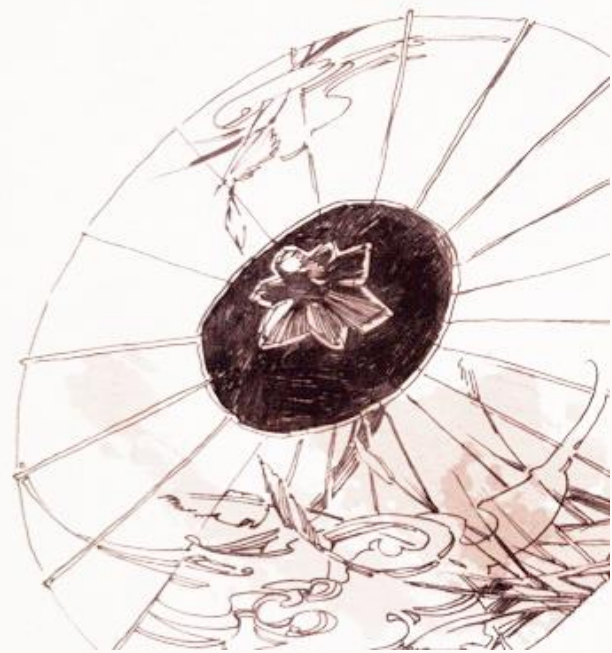
“Well, I got a question for you, too!” Ch’in Ching continued the lighthearted banter, giggling. “After I die, will you have a problem finding a husband or finding a wife? If not, why should I be worried?”

Not returning the banter, Shen Liangsheng pressed the doctor’s head down again, commanding, “Suck it some more.”

The obedient Ch’in Ching did as he was told, but the taller man did not spare him this time. He thrust into the warm cavity roughly until saliva dribbled all over slurring the doctor’s words, and he could barely breathe, and tears filled his eyes. Only then did Shen Liangsheng release his hot load in the man’s mouth, but he did not pull out and instead forced the man to swallow most of it.

"Cough-cough-cough." Ch'in Ching's reaction was not one originating in disgust but simply from being choked. When he spoke again, his voice was very hoarse.

"Rest assured, Shen Liangsheng..." Ch'in Ching looked up at the man with a hand on his chest as though he was still catching his breath and the other hand wiping away from the corner of his lips a drip of milky white. "You and I will end only when death parts us."



XI

When his *shifu* came, Ch'in Ching had just washed the dirty linens and hung them up to dry in the yard. Although no signs of indulgence could be found, he was nevertheless a little troubled. He could not have been more thankful that his *shifu* had missed Shen Liangsheng because otherwise he would have been stumped by the question of how to properly introduce the two.

"You know, *Shifu*, you don't need to constantly appear out of thin air. At least send me a letter and notify me ahead of time."

Ch'in Ching showed the older man into the hut and poured tea before sitting across from the man at the table.

"It's nothing, really. I simply wanted to visit you while I was free, as the chances are only going to become fewer."

When it came to expressing good intentions in a bad way, Ch'in Ching could well have inherited that from his master, too.

"But what are the latest developments?"

Ch'in Ching was well aware that his *shifu* would not visit without a good reason in times like these.

"You had written me last time regarding the incident of the Yichian Sect..."

"Didn't you bid me wait?" Ch'in Ching let out a few quick laughs, but his eyes remained untouched by the laughter. "Be frank with me. Which one is next?"

"Broken Zither Hills."

Ch'in Ching paused momentarily in surprise. Unlike the populous and wealthy Yichian Sect which stood amongst the main players, Broken Zither Hills had stayed far from *chianghu* matters for many decades, so much so that the newer generations might even have no knowledge of it. Perhaps only the previous generation could vaguely remember a certain man by the name of Shan "Tanchingk'e" Hai-hsin who was a legendary wielder of a pair of Judge's Brushes⁷² and remained

⁷² The Judge's Brush is the name given to two types of weapons: 1) a pair of short to medium length wood or metal sticks with one or both ends sharpened and a circular ring in the middle to be worn on a finger to allow for spinning; 2) a pair of short to medium length metal baton-like weapons with a fist-like contraption made to be thrown and to grapple, and attached to the fist a shorter protrusion that is used to tackle the enemy's acupuncture points.

undefeated in the *chianghu*. However, he accidentally caused the death of his good friend due to a misunderstanding and, taking the friends' broken zither with him, established Broken Zither Hills. Not only had the master never again been spotted in the *chianghu*, but his disciples were rarely active, too.

Now, it must be mentioned that Ch'in Ching had had a connection with Broken Zither Hills when he was young, partly due to a relationship between his *shifu* and the wrongfully killed friend of Shan Hai-hsin. While he was alive, he was an excellent zither player as well as a brilliant doctor, and after death, his broken zither and medicinal notes all went to Shan Hai-hsin. Ch'in Ching's *shifu* took him along to request a viewing of the notes in an attempt to find a treatment for his heartache. Although the treatment was never found, the talented boy had memorized a good chunk of the thickly bound books by the time his short stay at the Hills came to an end. That more or less qualified him as the dead man's disciple, and Shan Hai-hsin said to the boy barely ten years of age, "He would have been glad had he known you would inherit his learning."

When Ch'in Ching snapped back from the momentary lapse, he merely remarked, "Still trying to find the pages?"

"What they are searching for might be the stone rubbing of the pages. Chances are that somewhere out there they exist, since the pages have been circulating for quite some time. But Buddha and Mara have been in conflict since the beginning of time, so they have their bets on the original being safe kept in Shaolin. That's why the false rumours lured them in so easily last time. The only regret is that we failed to stop them from leaving.

"Do you blame me for the imprudent act, *Shifu*?"

"No, and dwell not on that thought. The target of our previous plot was the current deputy leader, but unfortunately they were also aware of the importance of the soul trigger and sent only the *hufa* to test the waters. Who knew we wouldn't be able to stop even a *hufa*. If it had been the deputy himself who came, it would have been an even more perilous situation." The older man heaved a long sigh. "Ultimately, we were at fault for

underestimating the enemy. It would have made no difference whether you saved that man or not."

"No, certainly there would be a difference." Ch'in Ching took a sip of tea and smiled calmly, "You've never tried to hide it from me, and I had guessed it myself, that the original pages had disappeared from this world long ago, and the ones in your hand are replicas as well. I cannot say with certainty whether the Hsing Sect will ever find the stone rubbings, but the chances that they do before the astronomical date next year are fairly low. There will be another date after this one, but the problem lies in whether or not you will be able to find the next vessel..." Putting down his cup, he raised a brow sarcastically. "First, for all we know, you might not live to see that day. And I've come to realize after all these years, *Shifu*, that you probably used up all your luck for this lifetime to locate me. Therefore, if the next vessel falls into the hands of the Hsing Sect, then the wood would have become a boat that would be impossible to stop from drifting away."

"Tell me, lad, why do you spend your time contemplating this instead of taking care of your weight?" Shaking his head, the man sighed again. "The contents of the replica are not false but if revealed too soon may grant them time sufficient to consider their options. I fear they may become wary and opt to wait a few more decades to be certain. If so, we are doomed."

"And that is why I said there would be a difference." Ch'in Ching poured another cup of tea as he flashed a sly smile. "He asked me what I wanted in return for saving him, so I requested a stalk of *huaimeng-ts'ao*."

"Hengsu! You are digging your own grave!"

"No, no, not a grave. It's obviously a tunnel to life." Ch'in Ching's voice was still a bit hoarse, and he kept drinking tea to compensate for the talking. "Though that tunnel is not for *me* to walk, you taught me to abandon my own life and death and to hold within me all of mankind – and *that* is love at the grandest scale."

In reality, the last two pages of the mantra not only contained the key to achieving the tenth stage of the Five Skandhas but also crucial details regarding the blood trigger vessel. This information not only included the vessel's *patzu* but also mentioned that the vessel would experience excruciating pains in the heart at the change of season, and the only way to alleviate the suffering was to use *huaimeng-ts'ao* as a catalyst in medicine. The headquarters must have been established on Mount Fut'u because this herb only grew on the very peak of the mountain.

"I requested a stalk of *huaimeng-ts'ao* to create a catalyst of my own," Ch'in Ching continued smilingly. "Not as a medicinal ingredient but as a dramatic prop after they discover the contents of those pages. If I were to be honest with you, *Shifu*, the *hufa* and I share a relationship of sorts. As you may know, there are men in this world who have plotted so often against others that they come to understand this world as one of deceit and treachery, and when someone treats them in earnest, they in turn can't help suspecting foul play. Yet, when someone

cheats them, it is easier for them to believe the authenticity of that lie. The pages state that the treatment for the heartache requires *huaimeng-ts'ao* as a catalyst, and the production of the physic takes an overwhelming three hundred and thirty-three days. Now, what would the average person do in this period of time, nearly one year long? Find a hole to hide in and make the medication? I think the Hsing Sect was clever enough to keep tabs on me from the moment I left their territory even if they didn't know the blood trigger needed *huaimeng-ts'ao*, so naturally the best choice for me is to stay put. When they find the pages, they will surely assume that saving him and requesting the herb were part of a plot to stay alive and that we believed they would not find the pages that quickly. My getting to know him afterwards would also become an act of espionage in their eyes, as if I were ready to leave as soon as something unfavourable happened. After putting on this elaborate play, do you think the Hsing Sect would believe that I was yearning to stay alive or that I was purposely seeking my death? And do

you think the thought would even occur to them that we have already discovered a way to resolve the mantra?"

"You..." After listening to Ch'in Ching's long-winded speech, the older man replied with another question, "You have obtained the *meng-ts'ao*, and you say that the Hsing Sect might not find the pages before the upcoming celestial date. Given that, you would be able to live if it weren't for me releasing the two pages. Hengsu, do you blame me for pushing you to meet your end?"

"Blame you for what?" Smiling, Ch'in Ching stretched a hand across the table and grabbed that of his *shifu*, giving it a light shake. "You need to stop growing soft as you age, *Shifu*. Besides, it's not as though I never knew about your plans, and if you are going to pitch your own life in this and maybe even drink Old Lady Meng's soup⁷³ before I do, what is there for me to blame?"

"But Hengsu..." The older man grabbed his pupil's hand, too, sighing. "In the end, 'tis I who am indebted to you."

⁷³ Old Lady Meng, or Meng Po, is a figure who is stationed in the underworld and distributes a liquid literally termed "water that confuses the soul" to each soul before it leaves the underworld to be reincarnated.

"If you must feel that way, then let us be real parent and child in the next life. As they say, children come to this world to collect debts owed by their parents."

Ch'in Ching kept poking fun at the situation, but not even a trace of a smile could be found on his *shifu's* face. He began to wonder if emotionlessness was an infectious disease that caused the old geezer to be so difficult this time.

The truth, however, was that Ch'in Ching had no idea that his *shifu* had kept one thing from him: the blood trigger vessel is destined to live only one lifetime and one lifetime only. His *shifu* had made up his mind to wager his own destiny to work against the heavens and rewrite that of his beloved student, but he could never be certain of the outcome. Speaking of the next life now only made his heart ache.

"Hengsu..." After a long silence, his *shifu* changed the topic. "I actually visited you once yesterday, but I noticed you had another guest and did not come inside."

Ch'in Ching immediately choked on his tea and began coughing as he panicked. He wondered how much his *shifu* had heard, so he reluctantly hummed in agreement and mustered a response. "It was him."

In reality, his *shifu* should not have heard anything improper because he had not entered the yard. It was only that Ch'in Ching himself was feeling guilty. His cheeks would not stop reddening, and he was not even able to verbalize Shen Liangsheng's name, muttering nothing more than the word, "*him*." Furthermore, his *shifu* could factor in all the laundry hanging in the yard to make some sense of the situation. However, he was not angry as Ch'in Ching had predicted and instead said, "I was not aware that your relationship with that *hufa* was of *that* sort."

"Well, it's a long story, a very long one..." Ch'in Ching could only gulp down more cold tea to relieve his anxiety. Seeing his master remaining speechless, he carefully probed, "I—"

"Hengsu, I remember you once liked a girl who lived on the next street over..." the older man interrupted and switched to a

recollection. "I had hoped then that you would cut all mortal ties to the world, thus I did not allow even a pet dog. Later I even made us move away from that place...but after these years, I'm actually a bit regretful... Perhaps it's the age, but I regret being so extreme then and even thought it would be good if you could again find someone you like. It'd be good even for temporary pleasure."

"I—"

"But now that you are involved with that man like this, first of all the violation of principle and even his identity aside, I am only afraid that you..."

"That I would forget about the task at hand because I might truly fall in love?" Ch'in Ching rushed to finish the sentence.

"*Shifu*, you must know my personality by now. Naturally, I would—"

"It's precisely because I know your personality that I fear you would take down a thousand enemy troops while expending eight hundred of your own. Why put yourself through that?"

"Naturally, I would be able to distinguish the important matters from the insignificant, and act accordingly." Without further explanation, Ch'in Ching finished his own thought.

"Moreover, you are the one who has attained a more comprehensive understanding of all the principles and ethics. Do you remember what you once said to me?"

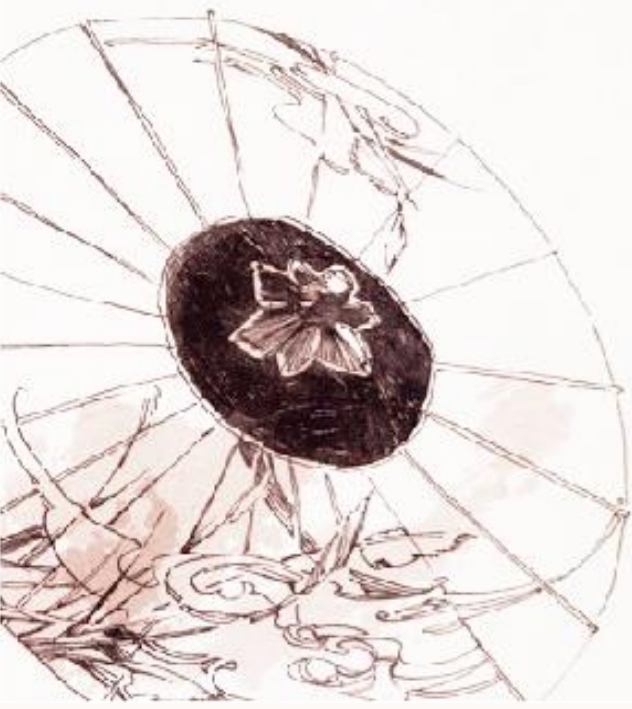
"..."

"He who realizes grand love," Ch'in Ching iterates, "harbours not selfish emotions. Your concerns are unnecessary, *Shifu*."

"...so be it. It is getting late, and I should be leaving." The older man was a little slow on his rise from his seat, and the otherworldly figure now gave off a sense of senility. "I cannot say with certainty when our next meeting will be. You—"

"I will proceed with caution." Ch'in Ching saw his master to the door and watched the man cross the yard and push open the gates. He suddenly let out hearty laughter. "*Shifu*, don't worry yourself anymore after you return home. Your pupil remembers and feels gratitude for the care and teachings he

has received in all these years. With you as company on the road to the Yellow Springs, he shan't be lonely."



XII

Ch'in Ching was painting by the window when he saw Shen Liangsheng again. In the middle of completing a portrait of children celebrating the New Year, he heard a few knocks at the door and went to answer it. Shen Liangsheng was standing outside, hands clasped behind his back and gave only a slight nod in greeting when he saw the doctor.

"You surely are becoming more and more polite, Shen-*hufa*, barging in without an invitation last time but knocking this time." Smilingly, Ch'in Ching stepped sideways to let the man in. "Are you just stopping by on your way back from business again?"

Shen Liangsheng glanced out of the corner of his eye and answered nonchalantly, "You may consider my visits however you wish."

"Oh? Could it be that Shen-*hufa* is here especially to see me?" Ch'in Ching obviously understood the implied meaning, but he still impishly teased him.

Paying no attention to the cheeky doctor, Shen Liangsheng instead noticed the brush and ink lying on the table and strode over to investigate. "Were you the one who painted that umbrella?"

"What umbrella?" Ch'in Ching paused in confusion until he recalled the storm when he first met Shen Liangsheng and the oil-paper umbrella he had been carrying. He said in a surprised tone, "You still remember that? But it wasn't mine; it was my *shifu's* work."

The man nodded and did not make any more remarks, but it occurred to Ch'in Ching that since his *shifu* had sensed a presence from outside the yard, it was very likely that Shen Liangsheng had also detected it because his *neikung* was certainly more advanced than that of his *shifu*. Although the *hufa* would not ask directly due to his calculating nature, that did not mean Ch'in Ching could keep quiet about the matter.

"Speaking of my *shifu*...um..." Ch'in Ching scratched his head.

"Last time he visited me...we were probably in the middle of... so..."

"So?" Shen Liangsheng raised his brows.

"So when might you have time to go meet him with me?"

Copying the man, Ch'in Ching raised his brows, too. "I have neither father nor mother, only this one *shifu*. The sooner you meet him, the sooner we can tie the knot."

"Good."

"...just kidding. If I really took you to see him, his anger would probably blow through the roof." After all this time, Ch'in Ching still had not learned from his mistakes and kept trying to best the man verbally. His constant defeats were apparent, but he just couldn't help himself. "Plus, my *shifu* isn't just anybody. You can't see him simply because you want to."

"No matter. You will not be able to meet my father who passed away many years ago, and you have already met Miao-*t'angchu*." Shen Liangsheng's dead-pan delivery kept the banter flowing.

"Huh?" Caught up short at the mention of Miao Jan, Ch'in Ching gaped at the *hufa*. "I never heard of the custom of meeting old lovers prior to the ceremony."

"Miao-*t'angchu* is my father's sworn sister."⁷⁴ Shen Liangsheng was finally making casual conversation about his background. "I also had no mother growing up, so I have no issue if you are willing to offer tea to her."⁷⁵

"Why wouldn't it be you offering tea to my *shifu*?" Ch'in Ching blurted out this retort regarding the bride's tea before focusing on Miao Jan as Shen Liangsheng's father's sister...so was that incest?

"I share no particular relationship with Miao-*t'angchu*." Shen Liangsheng gave him a look. "Do not overthink, Ch'in-*taifu*."

"Geez, she is your elder after all, but you refer to her so distantly. You must have been unpopular with the grownups when you were young."⁷⁶ Ch'in Ching made a teasing remark

⁷⁴ It is commonplace for two *xia* to swear loyalty to each other.

⁷⁵ It is customary for the bride to kneel before the groom's parents and offer tea to them.

⁷⁶ It is generally favorable to refer to grownups by their relative familial status to the child himself.

but pushed for more private details. “Be honest with me, Shen Liangsheng. What is Miao-*t’angchu*’s age this year?”

“If my father were alive, he would be more than sixty years old. Miao-*t’angchu* is around two years younger than he.”

“Uh...” Ch’in Ching had heard of Miao Jan’s title of “Fairy in a Portrait” – of course, the majority in the *chianghu* still called her ‘Evil Witch that Just Would Not Die’ – but he would never have imagined such a ridiculous difference between her girlish complexion and her actual age. He was dumbstruck.

“What you’ve done to the place is nice.” Shen Liangsheng changed the topic when he next spoke.

“Hm?” Ch’in Ching scanned his surroundings. He had not made any changes to the furnishings, but before long he realized the man was referring to the lack of the moist winter chill of the South because the floor of his hut was lined with *tik’ang*⁷⁷ that was typical of the North.

⁷⁷ Radiant heating, “the dragon’s breath,” originated in northern China around the 10th century B.C.E. Home surfaces would be covered with clay tiles and the cavity beneath connected by pipes to the cooking stove. Heat from the fire would circulate, be absorbed by the clay tiles, and radiate out into the room. The amount

"The *tik'ang* was meant for the plants, but I'm sensitive to the cold, so I share some of the benefit." Walking to the desk, Ch'in Ching took a spot right beside Shen Liangsheng and picked up his brush. He chatted leisurely with the man while adding a few short strokes of joy and laughter to the faces of the children who were covering their ears from the firecrackers. "You know there are herbs that fear the cold yet only can be seeded in the dead of winter, and therefore they grow only in the most southern of places. I heard that the seas there are bluer than even the skies in midsummer, and you can see schools of fish playing in the shallows, and there are corals of all colours of the rainbow, a piece of which can be worth more than gold..."

"The painting is nice, too." It seemed the taller man was not listening to his prattle, as he was observing the paper and giving praise – of course the praise did not seem very sincere, either.

of surface treated this way ranged from just the sleeping platform (*kang*), to the entire floor, to the floor and walls for those who could afford it.

“It’s just to kill time. It’s far too early to be drawing for the New Year.”⁷⁸ Ch’in Ching switched to the red brush⁷⁹ and was breathing life into the firecrackers and celebration into the painting when Shen Liangsheng suddenly pulled him into his embrace. Unable to lift his brush in time, he left a slanted streak of vermillion across the paper.

“...and here I was wondering why you were in such a good mood to chatter so much with me.” Far from offended, Ch’in Ching let out a chuckle. He put down the brush and turned to face the man. Teasingly he said, “If the bed was your ultimate goal, you could’ve been straightforward instead of ruining my painting, you know?”

It was as warm as a spring afternoon inside the hut, and even someone like Ch’in Ching was wearing only a single-layered robe. Without a word, Shen Liangsheng began discreetly

⁷⁸ It was most common for ancient artists to make art that corresponded to the season since it added to the aesthetics.

⁷⁹ The most common ink colour is black and the second most is red. One often finds at a traditional writing desk a specific brush for red ink. In this case, it is likely Ch’in Ching is painting with only these two colours, which is not unusual.

manoeuvring around the robe and the belt while kissing and sucking on one of the doctor's earlobes. When Ch'in Ching was totally naked, the taller man lifted him up onto the desk and positioned himself between his splayed legs letting his pants brush against the limp member. Head slightly bent, he tenderly nibbled at the doctor's Adam's apple and took his time exploring the body with both hands, seemingly bewitched with this silky smooth body.

"Shen-*hufa*, did you really come especially to see me?" A little ticklish, Ch'in Ching was asking through soft giggles. Shen Liangsheng felt the skin against his lips quivering, as if he were kissing a butterfly timidly fluttering its wings.

"That mountain of yours isn't all that far, but it definitely isn't close, either..." Ch'in Ching slightly deflected the head burying itself in the nook of his neck and asked smilingly, "Now that you have to run back and forth, don't you regret having wasted all the time you spent here in rehabilitation?"

"I do. All the more reason for me to make up for it."

Ch'in Ching had only meant to tease him and did not expect the man to admit regret. Before he could formulate a retort, he had been pushed back onto the desk. He watched the man pick up a mixed-hair⁸⁰ Huchou⁸¹ brush, dip it in the fluid remaining on the inkstone and, using his skin as paper, begin to paint in a graceful manner some unknown art.

It might have been a river – Ch'in Ching closed his eyes and felt the prickly hairs trail down in curves like water flowing downstream, slow at times and swift at others, a combination of *yin* and *yang*. The brush tip stopped below his navel and broke contact briefly. When contact was reinitiated, the Huchou brush was replaced by a soft-hair *hsiaok'ai*⁸² brush. The soft hairs dabbed and swirled, spreading tingles across his chest as they scraped past his nipples, always dancing away after the slightest touch and leaving behind but a trace reminiscent of

⁸⁰ The three most common types of hairs that brushes are made with are “wolf” hair, goat hair and mixed hair.

⁸¹ Huchou is one of four places renowned for quality brushes and is allegedly the birthplace of the ink brush itself (Qin Dynasty, 3rd century BC).

⁸² Xiaokai (*hsiaok'ai*) is perhaps the script with the strictest requirements for the brush used, and has come to refer to brushes capable of producing good xiaokai calligraphy. ‘Hsiao’ means small while ‘k'ai’ refers to the regular script.

eroticism. The two nubs gradually stood to quiet attention as did the member below, growing steadily harder with every stroke of the brush.

At last, after a pot of tea's time Shen Liangsheng put down the brush. Ch'in Ching opened his eyes, which were now swimming with lust, and saw a serpentine river winding down his torso, lined on both banks with blooming reeds swaying in the breeze, and a lone wild goose flying over the water. Indeed, a wistful, desolate scene.

"In time frost descends, from above the river and beds of yellow reed, as a cry signals the nearing wild goose."⁸³ Smiling at Shen Liangsheng, Ch'in Ching took the man's left hand and lightly rubbed his palm with his thumb. "The imagery of the poem is enthralling, and it's nice and all, but Shen-*hufa*, couldn't you draw something a little more auspicious?"

"What do you consider auspicious, Ch'in-*taifu*?" Shen Liangsheng bent down to question the doctor. Seeing the naked man beneath him, eyes unable to contain the sensual arousal

⁸³ The last line in the poem, *guo qin lou* (過秦樓) by Chen Yun Ping (陳允平; approx. 1220 – 1295).

and skin slightly flushed pink, he came upon an idea. He picked up a *kuei*⁸⁴ brush, dipped it lightly in vermillion and dotted it once near the doctor's eye. Together with the false tear streak, the rouge mark seemed all the more alluring.

"What do you think, Shen-*hufa*?" Ch'in Ching raised his head for a kiss that was not deep. Their lips merely touched and slowly rubbed against one another. He quietly continued, "Serves me right for falling victim to the peach flower."⁸⁵

The doctor mentioned the peach flower, so the *hufa* actually painted it. Moreover, he drew it on a rather lewd, southerly spot.

With the red *kuei* brush in his right hand and Ch'in Ching's fully hardened member in his left, Shen Liangsheng began painting from the base up, carefully tracing first the branches and leaves, then illustrating the sepal to support the swollen head. His technique was immaculate and completely steady, but the fine hairs were torturous and made Ch'in Ching moan aloud.

⁸⁴ One of the smallest of brushes.

⁸⁵ The flooded peach flower (泛水桃花) refers to several *patzu* (bazi) that are associated with romantic strife and excessive lust.

By the time Shen Liangsheng had painted all the petals of the flower on the crown, Ch'in Ching's voice was on the verge of cracking.

Shen Liangsheng had been pressing down on the tiny slit on top while he was painting, and when he finished and lifted the confining digit, out gushed the transparent love juices that had been pent up. The last drops even contained a trace of milky white. The doctor's ecstatic euphoria had evidently been pushing the boundaries of premature release.

The fresh pigments of the petals were clouded by the sticky fluids. With a loose grip on his member, Shen Liangsheng commented near the doctor's ear. "When one has much strife, much desire, 'tis called the flooded peach flower."⁸⁶ Ch'in Ching, you really took it literally."

Ch'in Ching peeped at his groin. A vermillion peach flower, with its branches and leaves, graced a proudly erect penis. In

⁸⁶ The peach flower is closely associated with the Xianchi (salt pool) star where, according to myth, the sun bathes in at the end of each day. This star in Chinese astrology is directly related to the abundance of love and loss of wealth in one's life. In casual use, the peach flower has become synonymous with romance and affairs. Also, the dot drawn by Shen Liangsheng is in a location that Chinese face mole readers would associate with susceptibility to sex.

the first instance it was too provocative for him to continue observing, but the next moment he found his gaze glued to the sight as though afraid to miss even a split second. Shen Liangsheng was slowly lowering himself, his head nearing Ch'in Ching's shaft, but he did not take it into his mouth. Instead, he lapped at the head repeatedly teasing the slit on top.

The *tik'ang* was so warm that Ch'in Ching had left a window open halfway for circulation, encasing the desk area in brilliant winter sunlight. In the rays hovered motes of dust from the earthly world like a light snowfall that would neither fall to the ground nor melt away into nothingness.

Ch'in Ching panted as he watched the lewd, explicit sight before his eyes, observing every lick. Every time the tongue gently touched his slick head, the pleasure he received amplified tenfold. He couldn't help thrusting his hips forward and begging softly, "Take it in deeper... I'm about to come..."

Unexpectedly, Shen Liangsheng opened wide and took him into his mouth, staining his unusually pale lips with bright

vermillion. Against that cold, sculpted face of his, the blood appeared to be the remains of an Asura's bloody feast, horrifying yet bewitching.

Moaning and gasping, Ch'in Ching found it impossible to last much longer under the new wave of stimulation. Shen Liangsheng took him in and sucked him only a few times before the length in his mouth jerked and shot out globs of salty semen that tasted to him like blood.

Rather than swallowing it, Shen Liangsheng propped the doctor's hips up, placed his lips against the entrance and pushed the fluid out of his mouth. He then spread the sticky substance with one hand and with the other gently wiped off the remaining dribble hanging on the soft member. "'Blowing flowers, picking pistils, spring has come again.'⁸⁷ Is this auspicious enough for you, Ch'in-taifu?"

Ch'in Ching did not catch his question, as he was still recovering from his climax. All he could feel was a slight stickiness around his entrance, but then the next moment he

⁸⁷ The first half of the line comes from a reminiscent poem, *yu mei ren* (虞美人) by Yan Ji Dao (晏幾道).

felt something enter. It was not a finger – something harder and longer – and after snapping back to his senses, he realized it must be the shaft of a brush.

What Shen Liangsheng was using was *chungk'ai*⁸⁸ which was thin enough to slide in smoothly with the lubricant. For a while the *hufa* pumped it back and forth while twisting before taking it out completely. With two digits he stretched the opening and flipped the brush over to tickle the sensitive area with the hairs, but very soon he directed it straight into the entrance.

“Let’s make this clear first…” A nervous Ch’in Ching clutched the man’s sleeve. “If you’re going to do this, you’d better not use any used ones. The term ‘a gut full of ink’⁸⁹ isn’t to be taken literally.”

“Ch’in Ching,” Shen Liangsheng pulled the brush stand over and swiped a finger across the dangling, unused brushes. “You can choose for yourself.”

⁸⁸ ‘Chung’ means medium and ‘k’ai’ refers to the regular script. Brushes that could produce a medium-sized *k’ai* script were called *chungk’ai*.

⁸⁹ The expression is used to describe someone who harbours literary or poetic genius within themselves.

The doctor turned to see on the stand only two wolf-hair *tak'ai*⁹⁰ and two goat-beard *t'itou*.⁹¹ He tried to make a compromise, frowning. "Could I *not* choose?"

"Don't be silly."

It was a warm utterance of comfort, but said at the present moment it only left Ch'in Ching glum and disgruntled. He opted to shut his eyes to the despairing situation as he felt himself being spread open. As the brush hairs swept against his entrance, poking and tickling, a preposterous notion occurred to him. He wondered how the bundle of soft hair would feel brushing and scratching his insides.

"You're already wet here." Shen Liangsheng firmly pushed the brush in as he asked, "Does it feel that good?"

Ch'in Ching wanted to retort that, considering its original function, it was natural to react to being penetrated there, but alas Shen Liangsheng did not stop to give him any leeway, rather adding another *tak'ai*. The shafts together were not very

⁹⁰ 'Ta' means large and 'k'ai' refers to the regular script. Brushes that could produce a large-sized *k'ai* script were called *tak'ai*.

⁹¹ This is one of the biggest brushes commonly used in calligraphy.

thick, but the brush tips were quite a bit thicker than the former. The tips inside him pointed at one spot and made him feel stretched, so he decided it was wiser not to speak since he was currently the meat on the cutting board and Shen Liangsheng the butcher.

By the time the taller man added another brush, Ch'in Ching was wet with sweat. He gathered enough strength and asked for mercy, "I really can't... Stop it now..."

That said, the *hufa* actually did stop tormenting him. After removing his own belt, he pushed his pants down to his knees and released his long-erect member, rubbing it against the doctor's thighs.

Afraid that he would just stick it in now, Ch'in Ching quickly closed his legs and shifted over to avoid that monstrous thing. But as soon as he did so, he was forced back to his previous position with that burning length now viciously thrusting against the tender skin on the inside of his legs.

The brushes inside moved along with the vigorous movements by the man. The bundles of hair scraped his narrow insides, arousing an itch that caused the ring of muscle to voluntarily contract in hopes of relieving it. But all it achieved was to push one of the brushes farther in, poking at that forbidden, sensitive nub and sending a violent shudder through the doctor. As well, the limp member in front began reacting.

Seeing the response, Shen Liangsheng purposely nudged the brush shafts with every thrust arousing the man beneath him. Gradually the pleasure and moisture built up, but the craving could not be satisfied. Before long, Ch'in Ching reached out with his own hand and pumped the brushes into himself.

"Can't wait any longer?" Shen Liangsheng grabbed the doctor's hand, asking in his ear.

"No," Ch'in Ching murmured in a rare burst of honesty and then added, "Quick...get inside me."

With Ch'in Ching so frank, Shen Liangsheng didn't see the point in withholding any longer. Sliding out the brushes, he

penetrated the doctor with force and speed, knocking the words in his mouth into senseless moans.

Initially, Ch'in Ching had his arms around the taller man's back, but later as the pounding continued, his strength left him. His arms slid down along the robe, falling to the man's waist, and sneaked underneath the fabric to circle around.

Now, the waist was a crucial source of power in the affair of love. Finding the doctor's embrace a hindrance, he pushed the arms farther down. Even through the wild movements Ch'in Ching could feel the two lumps of bare roundness, the precise targets of his longtime desires. He thought to himself that it would be nice even if all he could get was a touch, and his naughty hands began to grope and fondle the two taut globes. As he fantasized about how wonderful it would be to have the man under him for once, his member became even harder.

"Ch'in Ching." Knowing full well what the doctor was considering, he warned, "Don't think about what you shouldn't think about."

"But I- Ah!"

Just as he was about to reply, the manhood buried inside him pushed in at a different angle and proceeded to attack that one sensitive nub. The overwhelming stimulation erased all vocabulary from Ch'in Ching's mind. His fingers seemed to have a mind of their own as they clutched the taller man's hips and pressed them towards him in rhythm with the thrusts as though urging the man to pound harder and faster.

"Ah...Shen...Shen...Liangsheng..." After a hundred or so thrusts, Ch'in Ching could no longer stand it. He came, screaming the man's name, without any stimulation on his member. Shen Liangsheng was also nearing his limit. When the doctor's insides began to tighten with violent spasms around his manhood sending unbelievable pleasure to the head, he felt his abdomen tighten as well and pushed himself in to the hilt, reaching his climax at nearly the same time.

The two men caught their breaths for a while before Shen Liangsheng slowly pulled out his limp member. Seeing both of them covered with sweat and ink, he too stripped naked before

taking Ch'in Ching in his arms, flitting to the medicinal spring, and soaking in the water together.

"Lechery in broad daylight," Ch'in Ching joked with Shen Liangsheng after recovering, copying the *hufa's* usual serious tone, "is an offence against decency." But even as he made this utterance, his expression stiffened.

"What's the matter?"

Shen Liangsheng thought he was not feeling well, but a few moments later, Ch'in Ching muttered, "...leaking out."

Now, Shen Liangsheng had not come during their first time, and he had cleansed the doctor after their second time, so this was the first time Ch'in Ching was aware of somebody else's body fluid flowing out of him. He hadn't felt much while being pounded in the midst of a lustful spell, but the incontinent sensation left him feeling rather awkward.

Shen Liangsheng had shot his load extremely deeply, and even after soaking so long in the water he could feel little blobs dribbling out of him.

“Still there?”

The taller man had Ch'in Ching in his lap, chest to chest, and he noticed the discomfort still present on the doctor's face. He circled a hand around and poked a digit in the opening to clean the remains.

“Not anymore... Hey...you...hmm...” Shen Liangsheng's finger would not leave even after the job was complete, and his manhood showed some signs of revival. Ch'in Ching speculated whether the man was intent on another round and found some solace in knowing he would then at least know what it was like to die from overindulgence and exhausting his *yang* essence.

“We won't if you don't want to.”

Although it was not outwardly evident, Ch'in Ching could sense the *hufa* was currently in a good mood. Not only was the man willing to restrain himself, he was smoothing out the doctor's wet hair.

“Oh, right. I actually had something I wanted to ask...” Ch'in Ching was truly serious this time when he opened his mouth. “I

might live in the middle of nowhere, but I do catch wind of rumours about incidents in the *chianghu*."

"Act not so tentatively. Speak frankly." The taller man must have truly been in a good mood, for his stern words were uttered in a warm tone.

"If it really was you who did the deed," Ch'in Ching gazed at the man. "I want to know the reason why the Hsing Sect is committing such slaughter."

"What has it to do with you?" Shen Liangsheng's voice lost its warmth, and although his expression remained the same, the doctor knew very well that his question had destroyed the man's good mood.

"It should have nothing to do with me, but I happen to share some history with Master Shan of Broken Zither Hills." With a wry smile, Ch'in Ching retold the story behind the founding of the Hills, the master's disappearance from the *chianghu*, and his visit with his *shifu* to find a treatment. After finishing, he shook his head. "I remember *Shifu* told me once that Shan Hai-hsin wanted to take his own life to pay for his sins but chose to live,

not because he was afraid and clung to life, but because he wanted to suffer with the sin and guilt. He established the Hills and named it Broken Zither to build himself a prison and live every day in penance."

He took a quick pause before finishing.

"During the time I stayed there, I listened in on one of my *shifu's* conversations with him. Master Shan said that his sins were unforgivable even if he spent this lifetime repenting and that death would be release. Thus he wanted to live and suffer for his wrongdoings."

"Are you blaming me for killing him?"

"I just think that this kind of ending is..." But not even Ch'in Ching could say what that kind of ending was.

"The affairs of our sect have naught to do with you. Not listening and not asking are your wisest options lest you come to harm."

"Then pretend I didn't say anything."

"But let's say a day comes..." After both men were silent for some time, Ch'in Ching started another line of questioning with a sigh. "...When you and I must face each other over life or death. Surely the one to die would be me while the one to live would be you, right?"

"And why would such a day come?"

"The world is full of the unknown, and the variables are constantly changing."

"There is no need to ponder the unknown."

"Well, what would you do if I died?"

"Why, I'd either find a husband or find a wife."

Ch'in Ching burst out in giggles. "How hard-hearted you must be to remember that jest after all this time."

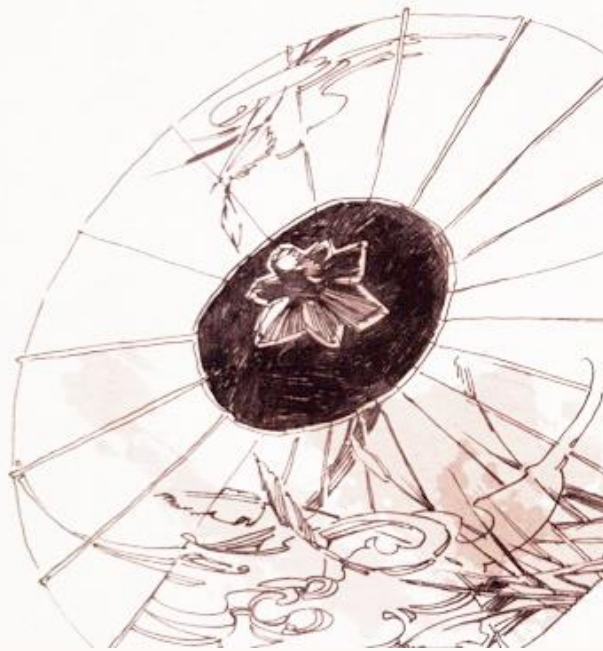
"Well, what I really want to ask is..." Taking another pause, Ch'in Ching flashed a smile and pressed his forehead against that of Shen Liangsheng. He looked into his eyes with earnest tenderness. "Since I love you so, I wonder if you also love me, too, even just a little."

"..."

"If I died, would you ever think of me, even for just one moment in a year?"

"..."

"Wouldn't even lie for me, huh..." Ch'in Ching backed away, chuckling wryly. Then he whispered, "You truly are a hard-hearted man, Shen Liangsheng."



XIII

By the time Shen Liangsheng returned to the sect, it was just past the Hour of the Rat. He bumped into Miao Jan at the gate of the side hall and bowed his head slightly. "You're up rather late, Miao-*t'angchu*."

"I was discussing something with Elder Fang."

Shen Liangsheng nodded his head again in acknowledgment and was about to continue walking when Miao Jan halted him. "I haven't seen you around for a few days. Did you go see that darling doctor of yours?"

"Has the deputy summoned me?"

"No, I'm just curious." Miao Jan tilted her head. "If it were anybody else, I would warn him not to let private matters interfere with the sect's affairs, but I have no need to say that to you."

"You are too generous with your praise, Miao-*t'angchu*."

"Who said I was praising you? *Hsiao*-Shen, you are getting more and more thick-skinned." Miao Jan laughed jeeringly.

"That poor Ch'in-taifu. Why did he have to fall in love with someone as difficult and obstinate as you? He's only going to suffer for it."

"Oh? I had no idea Miao-t'angchu had such strong opinions about me."

"Auntie Miao watched you grow up, Hsiao-Shen." Miao Jan usually put on the act of a young lady but now used her age to patronize the young. "Say the lad is giving you his heart. How much of that could you possibly reciprocate?"

"There's a saying, one may know the face but not the heart. How can you tell I am not just as committed?"

"Well, that's a question only you can answer." Miao Jan donned once again her mask of youth and giggled lightheartedly, "When you look at him, does your heart beat faster even if for just a second?"

"It is late." Shen Liangsheng did not respond and instead began to bid her farewell. "By your leave."

"I said I don't need to warn you, but I do want to stress one thing, *Hsiao-Shen*," Miao Jan added as he walked away. "Do not make the same mistake I made."

Now, she had rushed to be spectator to Shen Liangsheng's affair last time, but the truth was that the biggest spectacle of the Hsing Sect since its founding involved Miao Jan herself.

It was more than thirty years ago, and Shen Liangsheng had not yet been born. His father held the position of *hufa*, and Miao Jan was one of the four *t'angchu* in the sect. But one day she up and left the fine post, renouncing her sect, and eloped with someone.

In the end, she returned on her own accord before even a year passed, and with much thanks to Shen Sr. she avoided capital punishment for treachery. Instead she underwent a torturous process that was literally a 'mountain of knives and sea of fire' and further swore a deathly oath with her soul as indemnity, and only then did she regain a spot in the sect. As she was truly talented and did not make any more mistakes,

she was reinstated in her position as *t'angchu* when Shen Liangsheng was around seven or eight.

Naturally gifted and quick-witted even at a young age, Shen Liangsheng was expected to find great success in martial arts. The only unfortunate thing was that the boy was as stubborn as his father and even more cold-hearted. No one had ever spotted his smiles or tears after the age of three. Miao Jan used to tease him saying an icy doll like him might just melt away when the tears finally broke free.

Shen Liangsheng's father received a critical injury in his early days from which he never fully recovered. The man knew he would live a short life and thus instructed his son from the beginning, "The position of *hufa* will belong to you sooner or later, but you belong neither to me nor to yourself. Your fate is to be a weapon to defend and protect the sect."

Shen Liangsheng was a sensible boy early on and took his father's every word to heart. It wasn't until he was seven or so and came upon his first obstacle in his martial training that he

questioned his father, "How can man be weapon? And how could one become a weapon? I fear I cannot do it."

"You need to take your time to ponder the state of selflessness," His father replied. "You need only remember this: in this entire world, you will find refuge only in the Hsing Sect."

Shen Liangsheng fell quiet in thought. His father thought him too young to comprehend the idea and proceeded to give Miao Jan as an example. "Look at Auntie Miao and her extraordinary set of skills. After she sneaked away from the sect, we sent out scores of men to search for her for six whole months to no avail. And then what happened? She came back herself. You just have to remember that even if one day you become so powerful you can pierce the heavens and drill through the earth, the only place you can return to is here. The character *hsing* contains a blade, and in this lifetime, you are *hsing* and *hsing* is you."

At the time, Shen Liangsheng was still fairly close with Miao Jan and even called her auntie. It was the first time he had heard about this incident, and leaving his troubles aside, he sought Miao Jan and inquired into the details.

"Why did you betray the sect?" Not knowing how to be roundabout, the child threw a frigid question in her face.

But Miao Jan only smiled, rubbing his head. "That's because somebody was in love with me and gave me his heart, and I loved him, too. He said he wanted to spend the rest of his life with me, so I eloped with him."

"Then why did you come back?"

"Because eventually he found out about the bad things that I had done, so he didn't love me and didn't want to see me anymore. I came back because I had nowhere else to go."

Shen Liangsheng thought for a moment before asking again, this time with a trace of childishness, "Is that man still alive? I'll kill him for you."

"Thank you for the kind offer." Miao Jan burst out laughing. "He is indeed alive, but that's because I want him to be. You're still young, so you probably don't understand, but I finally found love. Even though our affinity ran dry and we didn't get a good ending, I still want him to live." After a pause, she continued with a lighthearted sigh while staring at the candlelight on the

desk. "That's right. I finally found love. Of course I'd want him to stay alive."

Don't make the same mistake I made.

That one utterance awakened the distant memories of the past. As Shen Liangsheng lay in bed with his eyes closed, he could still faintly make out Miao Jan's soft sigh. So many years had passed, yet she had not changed a bit, as though she were a paper cut-out from a painting. Yet even a paper cut-out was asking him, "Do you have a heart with which to love?"

In the dark, Shen Liangsheng placed a hand on his chest. His heartbeat was steady and constant. Day after day, month after month, year after year, it had never faltered once.

Miao Jan was not wrong. Whether it was lingering kisses or coital engagements, his heartbeat never quickened when he held the man close, even at the most ecstatic of times.

But she wasn't aware of one thing. Once upon a time, a child saw the tender expression on her face as she recalled her past lover and carefully stored it in the innermost corner in his heart.

That was the only thing Shen Liangsheng had ever learned since his childhood about this thing called “love.”

Ch'in Ching's best feature was his eyes. It had nothing to do with their attractiveness but rather the emotions they held within – they were always so rich with affection.

Ever since he first looked out upon that private world of summer rain and blooming reeds, they had been gazing at him with earnest attentiveness.

Then a hint of gentle sentiment found its way in, and with sincerity and tenderness they confessed their love for him.

All Shen Liangsheng knew and understood about this thing called “love” was a certain earnest and tender expression.

It was something that he had seen once in someone with whom he was close in childhood and then once again in Ch'in Ching's eyes.

Although he did not know what it meant to be moved or how to reciprocate that feeling, he wanted to stare into those affectionate eyes – that much he knew.

He wanted to stare into those earnest, gentle eyes while they looked back at him.

And if he could, he wanted to look at them forever.

“Ch’in Ching, this is a gift from Miao-*t’angchu* to make up for your first meeting.”⁹²

They did not exactly end on a sour note last time, but Shen Liangsheng nevertheless had difficulty finding a greeting when he made time to visit the doctor again. What he ended up doing to break the ice was to take out from his sleeve the case from Miao Jan and place it on the table.

On account of the intricate designs on the wooden case, Ch’in Ching could easily tell it belonged to a woman. He opened it to see it full of a balm-like substance tinged with scarlet, but when he put it to his nose, he detected no particular scent.

⁹² In some situations, it is customary to give a “first meeting present.”

"Wow, this has got to be..." Ch'in Ching chuckled, shaking his head. "You can tell its purpose with just a glance."

"I asked her. It's only an enhancer, does no harm to the body."

"I admire your ability to say that with a straight face." Ch'in Ching replaced it on the table. "She said no harm, and only you'd believe that. I won't use it."

Shen Liangsheng didn't respond. He was recalling Miao Jan's friendly dare when she passed the case to him. "Take this, *Hsiao*-Shen, if you want to feel your heart beating like a drum."

Daylight did not last long in winter. After Ch'in Ching lit the candle, he turned around to find Shen Liangsheng looking steadily at him. Their eyes remained locked until Ch'in Ching finally averted his gaze. The doctor blamed the *hufa*'s attractiveness for the defeat – even though the man's eyes held no affection, he was still stirred to restlessness.

"I wonder if you are of the same opinion as me, Shen-*hufa*." Ch'in Ching approached with a coy smile. "A night of passion is

impossibly short, thus it is best to enjoy the pleasures in a timely manner.”

Shen Liangsheng nodded at the statement. “Right you are, Ch’in-taifu.” But he instead sat down at the table and poured himself a cup of tea to sip on leisurely.

Left aside by the taller man, Ch’in Ching spat inwardly – *I see through your tricks* – but he could not help stepping toward the man to stand behind him and slowly remove the pin from his topknot. Seeing the sleek cascade flowing over his shoulders and down his back, Ch’in Ching found the usually emotionless face now framed with a hint of dark sensuality and bent down to plant a feathery kiss on the crown of his head. He teased quietly, “What a beauty.”

Shen Liangsheng looked up at Ch’in Ching and saw that his face had lost its previous fleshiness and was now gaunt. Somewhat displeased, the *hufa* pinched his cheek and commented as though he were evaluating his own livestock. “Winter’s the time to grow fat, but you’re getting thinner and thinner.”

“‘I shall never regret the loosening of my belt.’”⁹³ Ch’in Ching took the man’s hand and kissed it. “It’s worth becoming skinny pining of you.”

“I do not need you to loosen your belt.” Shen Liangsheng put down his cup. “Only your robes.”

“Shen-*hufa*, when will you ever fix this hypocrisy of yours, always appearing to be so proper when you’re not?” Ch’in Ching kissed the man again, this time on the palm, before letting go. He untied his belt, threw it aside, and began working on unfastening the knot buttons on his outer robe. One after another, the buttons came loose and exposed the clean, white undergarments. His fingers lingered for a moment and then resumed unbuttoning the rest until he had rid himself of all the fabric shields and stood bare right before Shen Liangsheng’s eyes. Caressing the man’s hair, the doctor asked quietly, “What now?”

“This fellow certainly did not lose any weight despite the rest of you.” Shen Liangsheng rested his head on one hand while

⁹³ A line from Liu Yong’s poem, *die lian hua* (蝶戀花), about his longing for his love.

touching the soft, hanging member between the doctor's legs. With a quick tease, it began to react and lift its head. He stopped and continued, "What do you think should happen now, Ch'in-taifu?"

"How about you give it a little kiss?" Ch'in Ching eased his growing erection to the man's lips and whispered back, "It hasn't gotten thinner, but it still missed you terribly."

After a quick glance upward, Shen Liangsheng indeed gave it a kiss as requested and proceeded to lick and suck. His tongue worked such wonders that Ch'in Ching's hips began slowly gyrating in rhythm with the man's sucking.

The candlelight on the desk begat two shadows, one standing and one sitting. The flame made a tiny leap, and the shadows swayed along and seemed to entwine even more tightly.

While he was servicing the doctor, Shen Liangsheng reached over for the balm. Flipping open the lid with one hand, he dipped in his index finger and then slid the digit down Ch'in

Ching's back and between the two cheeks. After massaging the opening a little, he pushed the finger in.

"Say, is this ointment really safe?" Ch'in Ching had his eyes closed in enjoyment but when he felt the slickness of the finger entering him, he thought of the fact that the aphrodisiac was made of some unknown substance and quickly backed away with a frown, giving up the pleasure. "I really don't think we should use it. Let's just leave it."

"Ch'in Ching." Shen Liangsheng hooked an arm about his hips and pulled him back. First he kissed the alert member and then commanded softly, "Behave."

It was the first time the taller man had spoken to Ch'in Ching so quietly and gently, and he instantly turned into jelly. Silently he exclaimed how beauty misleads the heart but swallowed his objection.

Noting Ch'in Ching's silent approval, Shen Liangsheng dug out a chunk of the balm and spread it inside the man with two fingers. While pumping the digits in and out, he continued sucking him off.

It was not long before the *hufa* realized something was amiss. The member in his mouth actually had become soft and would not harden no matter what techniques he applied.

“Is it really that uncomfortable?”

Moving his mouth away, he looked up at Ch’in Ching to find him biting on his bottom lip with a frown, sweat beginning to drip down his temples.

“Well, if you feel good, why is this guy so well-behaved?” Shen Liangsheng gently flicked the limp member while still fingering the man.

“How should I know?” His legs beginning to fail him, Ch’in Ching was falling into the *hufa*’s arms, face already buried in the nook of his neck. After some panting, he mustered a quiet utterance. “But… it’s quite… in there… mhm…”

“How is it in there?” With an earlobe between his teeth, Shen Liangsheng asked softly before increasing the speed of his fingers.

Ch'in Ching remained speechless but soon reached his own hand down to overlap with that of Shen Liangsheng.

The latter assumed Ch'in Ching did not like the velocity and expected to slow down, but it became apparent that the doctor was thirsty for more. He just would not verbalize it and only fumbled with the *hufa's* fingers attempting to add another digit in.

Although Shen Liangsheng understood his intentions, he feigned ignorance and even went as far as to stop his hand. He sat back and let Ch'in Ching manoeuvre another one of his fingers into himself after much toil. The man's entrance was winking, sucking on his digits as though they were enticing him to resume his penetration.

"What's going on with you?"

"You..." The *hufa* knew what was going on, so why was he asking? Ch'in Ching felt a prick of frustration, but he knew the man would refuse to resume if he didn't say it aloud. He could only abandon what little shame he had and speak honestly, "It really itches...in there, so help me."

After shedding his humility, the rest came a lot easily, as nothing seemed too hard to utter now. Shen Liangsheng had just resumed his fingering when Ch'in Ching's hands slid down to the *hufa's* crotch and covered his manhood. Then came the doctor's mumbled prompt. "Are you hard? Hurry up and stick it in..."

"Impatient already?" Shen Liangsheng began undressing while fingering Ch'in Ching, pulling his pants down to reveal his swollen length. He was about to order the man to sit down, but the man could not wait another moment and held the shaft steady himself before finding the right position and impaling himself on it in one go. His entire manhood buried into the moist heat, and Shen Liangsheng could not suppress the soft gasp that escaped his mouth.

The candlelight swayed, just as Ch'in Ching was rocking wantonly on Shen Liangsheng's lap. From the front he showed absolutely no signs of activity, but from behind he was receiving

an incomparable level of stimulation, as though the pleasure that belonged in the front had all been trapped in the back by that questionable aphrodisiac. Every inch of his insides was at the height of sensitivity as if all his nerve endings were rerouted to that one place. At the same time he felt as though it were not enough; he would be hungry one moment but always hungrier in the next. It was all he could do to beg Shen Liangsheng, "Go to the bed...you on top...faster that way..."

Hearing this, Shen Liangsheng took the man into his arms and walked them both to the bed. After setting down Ch'in Ching, he took the opportunity to strip himself, but he realized the man could not wait for even that long. As soon as the manhood left him, Ch'in Ching replaced it with three of his own digits and started fingering himself as he stared at Shen Liangsheng with a half aggrieved, half desperate gaze. The *hufa* felt the fires of lust within him roaring higher and hotter under those eyes, so he quickly rid himself of all garments and pounced on the bed pounding into the man. He buried himself in and did not move back and forth, instead stirring Ch'in

Ching's tight insides like a swimmer's legs treading water.

Meanwhile, he asked, "How's this?"

"Ah...yeah...yeah..." Ch'in Ching's mind was in complete disarray when he caught a whiff of a phantom fragrance. Incidentally, the balm was scentless under normal conditions but released a warm scent only in the heat of desire. It had the effect of heightening arousal but also clarity.

Called back to earth by the fragrance, Ch'in Ching felt his head clear and every bit of pleasure from below travel to the crown of his head, then to his four limbs and every one of his bones. This became an unbearable tingle that caused him to wind his arms around Shen Liangsheng's neck and writhe uncontrollably. The sensation of their skin rubbing together gave him such ecstasy that he wished they could simply melt into one, their flesh and blood merged forever.

Shen Liangsheng also smelled the fragrance. Ch'in Ching's eyes burned with passion as he stuck out his chest to rub his alert nipples with those of Shen Liangsheng, evidently pursuing

stimulation whichever way he could. Seeing this, the *hufa* swore his heart rate truly hastened. Although he knew it was because of the phantom fragrance, he still felt an indescribable emotion in his chest, almost like anxiety that arose from deep within urging him to devour this man whole, flesh and bone, so that his person would be his totally.

“Look at me, Ch’in Ching,” he demanded before quickly straightening himself to a half-kneeling position. He pushed the doctor’s legs up then pressed them down, folding him in half like a piece of paper so that his butt was in the air. Even from Ch’in Ching’s angle, he could see the manhood penetrating him, entering fully before pulling out fully. The monstrous shaft was like an anaconda drilling its way time and again deeply into him and sending wave after wave of pleasure that threatened to eat up all of his vital organs.

“What a slut you are. How else do you want me to fuck you?
Hm?”

Shen Liangsheng would never, ever, utter such vulgar expressions of lust, but at the time his heart was actually beating like a drum, the pace only gaining speed. Such a vivid sensation impelled him to abandon all self-restraint and devote himself fully to this fleshly engagement.

“Ah...hah...” Ch’in Ching hadn’t the slightest idea how else he could be fucked or how he should cope with this. Shen Liangsheng had tied his member last time preventing it from release, but he knew what the end would ultimately be. This time, however, his member would not harden no matter what. He was obviously in mind-blowing ecstasy now, but he did not know how he could achieve that final climax.

Shen Liangsheng might have been in a rare state of total engagement, but he still held on to shreds of rationality. Concerned for Ch’in Ching’s stamina in this position, he eventually laid the man down flat after dozens of thrusts, tucked a pillow underneath his hips and resumed the forceful pounding in missionary position. He felt the slick, soft walls

tightly wrapped around him as they kept squeezing and convulsing around his head as though trying to glue themselves onto it. With his member treated to such delights, even someone with exceptional self-control like Shen Liangsheng was unable to bear it much longer, and before a stick of incense could finish burning, he had reached his release.

He looked at Ch'in Ching after catching his breath to find teary signs in the doctor's eyes, so he pulled the man into his embrace, their nether regions still very much connected, and joined him at the lips launching into a passionate exchange.

"Your buddy here is awfully well-behaved. Could it be that it doesn't feel good enough?" After some kisses, Shen Liangsheng became hard again and began pumping himself slowly while stroking the man's limp member. He leaned into his ear. "What should I do to make you feel good?"

"I... well, I'm certainly never going to use that ever again..." Ch'in Ching grumbled and then whispered in the man's ears secretively. "Not that it doesn't feel good... It feels so good down there...so good I could die..."

“See for yourself…” Shen Liangsheng led his hand down to the spot at which they were connected and returned more quiet words of passion. “You’re so hot and soft there, and so very tight, I just want to fuck it all night long.”

“Good…” Ch’in Ching kissed him again and said through mumbles, “I love you so… One night goes without saying… I wish I could spend the rest of my life with you between the sheets…”

Outside the hut, the long night grew cold, but on the inside, it was exploding with heat and passion.

Holding Ch’in Ching close, Shen Liangsheng thrust himself in deeply as if he would only rest once his bloated balls entered the doctor as well. His pubic hair had become moist from the lewd fluids leaking from the man, and the imagery of black, shiny hairs slick against two fair butt cheeks was the epitome of eroticism.

“Turn around and bend over,” Shen Liangsheng ordered a change in position after a while. The doctor bent over on his

knees pushing his hips into the air. The hole between the cheeks was fucked so much it was open like a blooming bud. On the stigma hung pearls of milky white – the semen he had just shot in.

Ch'in Ching waited with his butt in the air for the re-entry but felt the root of his ethereal pleasures only rubbing back and forth near his entrance, stubbornly rejecting his invitation. He could only reach back with his hands and spread his cheeks apart, begging wantonly, "I can't stand it. Stick it in, quick..."

Before he finished, he felt it enter him once more, this time with the company of two hands on his chest roughly playing with his nipples. He let his voice free, moaning and screaming, only for it to come to an abrupt halt – it felt so good he was crying.

Although he could not reach release through his manhood, an endless stream of pleasure came from his behind and formed a dense web entrapping him more and more tightly. In the end, after countless positions and innumerable hours, the phantom

fragrance could no longer keep him conscious, and his vision faded to black.

But the last thing he registered before he lost awareness was not the infinitely deep trench of carnal desire but the soft touches of the man kissing away his tears and their streaks – again and again, stubbornly and impulsively on his closed eyes.



XIV

The sun was high overhead by the time Ch'in Ching awoke, and the man had long left his side leaving behind only cold bedding.

He slept until midday but still felt sore all over because of the wild night. Ch'in Ching shook his head and chuckled before leaving his bed. After dressing and washing, he was about to open the windows to get some fresh air when he found a slip of paper weighed down on the desk.

Will come find you for New Year's if not busy in the sect.

No greeting. No closing. His message was like his person, meticulous in content and strong and keen in shape.

As he clutched the slip, it occurred to him that it was the first time the man had arranged the next rendezvous with him. Again he shook his head and chuckled. He crumpled it up to throw it away, but in the end he went to the secret compartment on the bed, took out the book full of his childhood daydreams and tucked the slip in.

"I wonder why 'love' and 'lust' are always paired in people's minds." Ch'in Ching returned to the window and pushed it open, dispersing the traces of love and lust that remained. "Lust doesn't necessarily occur with love."

In about another fortnight came New Year's Eve. Ch'in Ching waited from sunrise till sunset but received no visitors even after the Hour of the Dog had passed. Thus, he assumed that the man was busy and would not come that day. He donned a thicker coat before locking the gates and heading to the gambling house in the nearby town to spend another New Year's Eve alone.

While Ch'in Ching's *shifu* was certainly the disciple of a fabled recluse, he chose to hide himself in plain sight. He held the position of Grand Diviner in the imperial court, a true creature of the State. Currently the State was weak and lacked men of talent. The less able the Son of Heaven was, the more he believed in the auguries. Hence, Ch'in Ching's *shifu* not only had to read the skies and consult the almanac, he was also

responsible for the oracle bone divinations and all other ceremonies. Given the time of year, the man was not at liberty to visit his pupil.

Every year Ch'in Ching spent the holidays by himself, but the mountains proved too lacking in liveliness, so he would sit and indulge his bad habits at the betting table. He felt fortunate that such a place as this, open every day of the year, existed. It was loud and energetic, and he even found it convivial to welcome the New Year with a bunch of strangers who enjoyed gambling as much as he did.

"And where do you think you're going, Ch'in-*taifu*?"

Ch'in Ching had locked the gates and just slipped out of the valley when he heard someone questioning from behind. After a momentary pause, he turned around with a grin. "Timing really is everything. You would've missed me if you had come any later."

"I thought I told you to wait for me." Shen Liangsheng began walking towards him. His expression appeared normal, but his tone contained a hint of discontent.

"But I did," Ch'in Ching hurriedly appealed as he saw the man approaching. "And you didn't come." Then, he added in a softer tone after a pause, "You must know, Shen-*hufa*, that waiting is the worst feeling. Your stomach just hangs in the air fluttering." He reached out for the man's hand and sighed. "In the end you become frightened of waiting, and you just give up."

"..." Shen Liangsheng gripped the doctor's hand in return and answered, after a long silence, "Then I won't make you wait again."

The wild wintery wind whistled through the mountains, and the two men standing hand in hand in the gloaming truly seemed to share a delicate bond of mutual reliance.

Unfortunately, Shen Liangsheng did not know at all what Ch'in Ching knew too well, that the doctor *would* have to wait

next time, that he was destined to wait for this man since the day he was born.

That he would have to wait for him to escort him to his death.

“Shen Liangsheng, come to town with me.” After some time, it was Ch’in Ching who first retracted his hand and started walking. “I don’t have anything prepared at my place. If there’s a restaurant still open in town, we can eat a year-end supper there.”

“You should eat regularly, as you’ve been losing weight.” Without warning, Shen Liangsheng drew the man into his arms and flitted down the mountain. “You shouldn’t have to be told that. And you call yourself a doctor.”

“But I was waiting for you.” Ch’in Ching joked on tirelessly, leaning on the taller man’s chest, “I had the rice washed and was waiting for the *hufa* to start working in the kitchen making me congee again to warm my heart.

"Do not be cheeky." Without slowing down, Shen Liangsheng pulled the man closer into his embrace blocking the chilly air.

After arriving in town, they could not find any restaurants still open. Ch'in Ching then thought of the noodle stand in front of the gambling house that was open year-round, so he led Shen Liangsheng to it. When he saw the gambling house, however, his dice hand began to itch, and he inveigled good-naturedly, "Well, seeing as I'm not hungry, would you care to accompany me for a few rounds?"

Shen Liangsheng shot him a glance from the corner of his eye but did in fact enter the facility with him. He stood by the table watching Ch'in Ching playing *sic bo* with a horde of gamblers.

Anyone who lingered at the gambling house on New Year's Eve was bound to be an addict who wasn't willing to part with the die even for a family reunion. With bloodshot eyes, they howled and screamed at the twists and turns of every roll.

Now, Ch'in Ching may have been an addict too, but he at least wore the mask of a scholar. Standing in the crowd, he appeared rather calm and self-assured, although his hand belied his demeanour, as he lost more rounds than he won. Nevertheless, he did not seem down-hearted.

"You will lose for sure if you bet 'Small.' "

As he heard the whisper, he turned and saw Shen Liangsheng just behind him. He replied quietly, "You can tell from the sound?"

"What do you think?"

Chuckling, Ch'in Ching remarked silently – *of course someone with your neikung can hear it* – but he said aloud, "The fun is in the suspense. What's the point in knowing?"

Instead of answering, Shen Liangsheng took the doctor's hand and moved his bet to 'Big.' The dealer uncovered the lid, and the sum of the dots was 'Big,' exactly as the *hufa* anticipated. Ch'in Ching gathered his silver winnings but then left the table. He smiled while shaking his head. "It's my money. Why do you care if I win or lose?"

"You yourself belong to me. Why be quarrelsome about money?"

Ch'in Ching shot a look of surprise in his direction. This man was so uncharacteristically wordy today that the sun must have risen from the west.

"Come on. Since you won money for me, I'll treat you to noodles." Deciding that the conversation was not going to go anywhere, Ch'in Ching tugged at the taller man's sleeve and headed out of the building first. When they both sat down at the stand, he continued the chitchat. "Come to think of it, I eat here every New Year's Eve. The owner is an old widower, no wife or children, so he runs this shop even during the holidays to earn a few more coins."

Shen Liangsheng nodded and said no more. When the noodles were served, the two men each picked a pair of bamboo chopsticks and shared what could be considered a holiday supper.

The shop was set up in front of the gambling house and made good use of the location. Especially at this time, the patrons were all gamblers who could not stand their growling stomachs and came out for some quick chow before diving nose-first back into the games. Every one of them practically inhaled their food before rushing back. Amongst the diners, only Ch'in Ching and Shen Liangsheng felt no sense of urgency, sitting quietly in a corner across from one another eating their noodles.

Under the hazy lantern light, the people around them came and went, but that had nothing to do with them. Even the brightly lit, clamorous gambling house seemed to drift further away, leaving only the two of them and two bowls of noodles in the protective bubble of their small, tranquil cosmos. Hovering above this world of mortality, they meandered skyward along with the steam from the stove, higher and higher, farther and farther.

As if they could even reach the stars and the end of the world.

But in the end, it was just a bowl of noodles. Chewing his food carefully, Ch'in Ching finished and paid the bill. He voiced his wish to take a stroll to help digestion, so the pair left the noodle shop. Walking in silence, they turned into a narrow street to take the short route to the town entrance.

Residences lined either side of the alley, their doors and windows tightly shut, concealing what must have been scenes of families in happy reunion. Faint sounds of joy and laughter could even be heard from inside the walls.

Ch'in Ching recalled the times when his *shifu* had spent the holidays with him prior to joining the imperial court. At the time the doctor was still that young boy who could not face death with acceptance. He would argue futilely, while forcing down dumplings which he despised, "You say the demonic sect is savage but mostly kill people of the *chianghu*. So if the commoner is safe, why must my measly life be sacrificed?"

He remembered his *shifu* explaining to him, as he halved the dumplings so they would cool, "How could the Son of Heaven

ignore the loss of order in the *chianghu* as the demonic sect amassed power against the court? Now that the maternal branches are eyeing the throne, I fear that the moment the country falls into civil war, the frontiers will fall into warfare as well. Then it wouldn't be disaster just for the *chianghu*. The commoners would be devastated, too." At the end of his discourse, he would remind the boy, "Have a few more."

Later his *shifu* entered the court and became a piece in the game, and he never had the chance to eat New Year's Eve dumplings again.

Ch'in Ching's steps slowed as he reminisced. Without rushing the man, Shen Liangsheng strolled along with him. Midway down the mile-long alley, doors on either side suddenly swung open – it was time to light firecrackers and welcome the New Year.

Some kids were brave enough to hold a stick of incense and light the explosives while the adults held them up, and then they leapt away giggling when the snap and crackle began,

hands clapped over their ears. Ch'in Ching stopped to watch, and a warm emotion blossomed in his heart, a certain peaceful joy.

Shen Liangsheng halted beside the doctor and quietly observed him. Spotting the smile about his lips, the *hufa* experienced a fleeting moment of unusual tranquility. So calm was he that he seemed to have gone back to the time when they first met. He had opened his eyes and seen another man, another pair of eyes looking earnestly back at him. "The rain will stop soon," he had said. "Staying alive is better," he had said. "I will save you," he had said. "What say you?"

As the firecrackers went off, Ch'in Ching watched the merry and harmonious scene with a smile while Shen Liangsheng gazed at him thinking back to the doctor's teasing replies as he treated his wounds. A light smile rarer than shooting stars appeared about the *hufa's* lips, but unfortunately it disappeared in the next moment. If Ch'in Ching knew what he had missed, he surely would have cried with distress and regret.

I will let you save me if that is what you wish to do.

Shen Liangsheng mused in silence before the fleeting smile vanished.

My devotion, body and soul in return for saving my life – that is not necessarily an unfair trade-off.

After the firecrackers died down, the crowd of families gradually dissipated, leaving the two outsiders with nothing else to do but to keep advancing.

They ambled to the end of the narrow alley. Stars lit up the cloudless, winter sky above, and beneath their feet was a red carpet of firecracker flakes.

In silence, they arrived at the mouth of the street. Shen Liangsheng stopped and asked out of nowhere, "Does anything come to mind, Ch'in-taifu, after walking over a path of crimson firecrackers?"

Naturally, Ch'in Ching comprehended the implied meaning since he had a naughty mind to begin with, and he replied without skipping a beat, "Now that the firecrackers have been

set off and we have walked across the nuptial carpet,⁹⁴ what do you think should come next?"

"An auspicious day, a pleasant evening – should I say Happy New Year or..." Shen Liangsheng wrapped his arms around the man and leapt into the air. As he flitted high above the world, he looked down at Ch'in Ching. "Should I say Happy Honeymoon?"

The answer was likely the latter: Shen Liangsheng made his way nimbly through the formations of the valley and vaulted right over the walls into the yard. The moment Ch'in Ching felt the ground beneath his feet, he was thrust up against the door, and the *hufa* was on him, exploring every nook and cranny of his mouth with his tongue. Ch'in Ching's scalp tingled from the deep, passionate kiss. Their tongues were entangled like two copulating serpents that could not bear to part even a hair's breadth.

⁹⁴ It is tradition to lay down a red carpet for the bride to walk on when she arrives at her groom's house.

"Shen...hm... Listen..." Ch'in Ching managed to get his words out after giving a strong push. "It's freezing out here. We should at least head inside, no?"

After his final syllable, he felt himself leave the ground once more, but this time Shen Liangsheng was holding him by the butt. Face to face, they stared into each other's eyes as he walked towards the building.

Ch'in Ching was not much shorter than the other man, so he had to wrap his arms around his neck and his legs around his waist in order to maintain balance. Of course, he did not let the man off without some teasing remarks. "How indecent! How improper!"

"Ch'in-*taifu*, did you really think you were decent or proper?"

"Fine, so I'm not, but you should at least try to resist my bad influence."

Meanwhile they were entering the room. Shen Liangsheng headed straight for the bed and set Ch'in Ching down. The two men stood face to face but did not resume their kiss. Their

words seemed to have been depleted during their short trip, and all that was left was a silent stare.

After a moment, Shen Liangsheng led Ch'in Ching's hand to his belt before sliding his own hand up to the doctor's neck and carefully untying the knot buttons on his collar. The fervent urgency earlier in the yard had vanished. Slowly and delicately, they undressed each other, and when their eyes accidentally met, they would look down again and continue with the handiwork.

Such a chaste scene truly befit a newlywed couple who walked through all the traditional observances – the exchange of *patzu*, dowry and gifts, the reverence to heaven and earth and to the elders, the matrimonial wine – to finally come to this step: taking off their partner's garments in the quiet darkness to consummate a hundred years' worth of happiness.

Once both had been laid bare, Shen Liangsheng took Ch'in Ching into his embrace, and they fell onto the bed. They were both erect and ready, but neither rushed to the main course.

Pinning the doctor down, Shen Liangsheng went to work untying the ribbon in his hair with one hand while sliding out the pin securing his own headdress with the other. The ornament tumbled away, and his dark, luscious hair cascaded down to the man's cheeks and slipped lower to join the flow of the man's hair.

There they lay together in quietude for some time before Shen Liangsheng finally dipped down and planted a kiss between Ch'in Ching's eyes. From there he kissed his way downward to capture his lips in a tender restraint. He sucked on them delicately as he gently ground against the man.

Ch'in Ching blindly pulled loose the bed clothes and covered both of them, and under the sheets their naked bodies rubbed against each other with a taboo, secret pleasure.

It was Ch'in Ching who lost his patience first after a long, teasing entrée. He reached down between them and manoeuvred their members to the same spot so that the shafts and the sacs would grind against together with so much as a lift

of his hips. The head of his length felt so unbearably tingly that more and more lewd juices oozed out from the slit, to the point that a small pool gathered on his abdomen.

Shen Liangsheng released his lips and whispered in his ear, "You're so wet."

Ch'in Ching whispered back, "Then how about you suck it a little?" Then he added after a pause, "Turn around, and I'll do you, too."

Shen Liangsheng then shifted his orientation so his legs were next to the doctor's head. He took the man's manhood deeply into his mouth as the man did the same to him. The loud, sloppy noises were especially distinct in the night.

Ch'in Ching was not as good at endurance as the *hufa* but did not want to always shoot first, so after a pot of tea's time he stopped and said to the man, "That's enough."

This time Shen Liangsheng truly listened to every one of the doctor's commands and let his member slide out of his mouth. He trailed his tongue down between the cheeks and began

toying with the opening, reaching in deeply to nudge the slippery walls and nibble on the tender skin around the entrance. Having that spot played with by the *hufa*, Ch'in Ching felt a sense of shame that he did not want to admit but also a burning pleasure inside him even greater than that which he received from the fellatio.

Eventually, Shen Liangsheng returned to their previous face-to-face position, and Ch'in Ching initiated the kiss this time. While they kissed, he felt his legs being gently pushed apart and a finger sliding in and out of him.

“Does it hurt?”

Naturally it did not hurt since his entrance was wet and the man had inserted only one digit. Hearing the concern in his voice, Ch'in Ching replied honestly and then immediately realized the tease, that the man was speaking to him as to a bride on her wedding night. The doctor's cheeks flushed red, but before he could form a retort, he let out a low yelp from the sharp pain shooting up from his rear.

The opening was wet, but it had not been properly relaxed. Shen Liangsheng plunged himself totally into Ch'in Ching, and although the scorching, rock-hard shaft did not tear the entrance, the doctor was left hissing and gasping in pain. He sincerely wanted to know why he was suffering this injustice when he hadn't even provoked the man this time.

"Just hang in there. It'll stop hurting soon." Shen Liangsheng's utterance was as gentle as his thrusts were violent. This was exactly the tone that Ch'in Ching found irresistible, and all he could do was to admit that the colder and more loveless a person appeared, the more potent their rare expressions of affection.

After quietly bearing with the pain for some time, it indeed ebbed slightly. It was as though his opening had recognized the intruder at long last and was willingly enveloping it despite the dull discomfort, recalling the blissful pleasure that would soon follow. Thus, it clung desperately to the length, afraid that it would leave.

Shen Liangsheng felt the tight canal squeezing around him, the tender flesh gently pulsating and massaging his head. A gush of heat rushed straight to his groin and urged his hips to rock more quickly. Wet slushy sounds soon emerged from the penetration, but it was because Ch'in Ching had begun excreting lewd juices from within, and he was actively pushing his hips up to meet the *hufa's* thrusts.

Shen Liangsheng began pinching his nipples while playing with the man's ear, sucking the lobe and wetting the canal before thrusting his tongue in and out in a suggestive manner.

With multiple sensitive spots being tended to, Ch'in Ching was floating giddily on cloud nine. His member was angrily flushed and erect even though its desperate needs were being neglected. It stuck out against Shen Liangsheng's lowered torso, and the head scraped across the tight knots of muscles on his abdomen with every thrust of the *hufa's* hips. The stimulation was beyond words, and climax could not come soon enough.

Mind clouded, Ch'in Ching reached down to relieve himself, but a soft utterance shook him from his daze and made him forget about his ignored needs. If it wasn't for the lips flush against his ear where the whispers originated, Ch'in Ching would have assumed he had hallucinated.

"Be obedient, Su-er," the man said, "and call me husband."

"What..." Despite knowing those words were truly uttered, Ch'in Ching could only pretend he was dreaming, but then he couldn't just pass it off as a dream. His face was practically burning now, but thankfully it was dark. He murmured between tight lips, "You can't just use the courtesy name like that..."

But Shen Liangsheng just did what he had done once before: he stroked Ch'in Ching's manhood but kept a finger pressed tightly on the slit.

Ch'in Ching had learned from the previous time the frustration of a denied orgasm, so when the pain and pleasure began to build on top of each other, he willingly joined in this

romantic wedding night skit in exchange for release and uttered the magic word.

The next moment, the pressure on his member was lifted, and cum gushed out in splurges. Overwhelmed by euphoria, his eyes lost their focus, and his chest rose and fell wildly in an effort to cope.

Shen Liangsheng paused his thrusting as the violent orgasm ran through the canal and simply stayed fully hilted enjoying the ecstatic stimulation. He felt as though he had taken a short trip to heaven with Ch'in Ching even though he himself had not reached release.

When Ch'in Ching's mind returned, he held onto the man's back and rolled over with him, switching their position, and lying on top of him in order to catch his breath.

Shen Liangsheng let him and leisurely patted his back for him.

"Do you also have a nickname, Shen Liangsheng?"

He simply wouldn't be his *shifu's* star pupil if he didn't strike back after being dealt such a humiliating blow. He teased the *hufa* while lying on him like dead weight. "Sheng-er? Or perhaps *Ah-Liang*? I think *Ah-Liang* sounds nice."

"..."

"*Ah-Liang*. *Ah-Liang*... It sure sounds like a girl's name."

"..."

"I love you, *Ah-Liang*. Give me your hand in marriage."

"..."

"Marry me, and you will be the only one for me this lifetime. We'll find a quiet place and settle down, keep a few chickens and ducks, have a son and a daughter, and live until one hundred. How does that sound?"

"..."

After a while, Shen Liangsheng took Ch'in Ching's hand and interlocked their ten fingers. Then he let go and led it down to where they were still connected. "If you really want kids, I can ask *Miao-t'angchu* if she knows of anything."

“No, thank you. I’m fine, thank you very much. I was merely jesting. Please do not take it seriously, Shen-*hufa*!” The moment he heard that woman’s name, he thought of the balm, and at the thought of the balm he recalled that feeling of being caught between life and death. He was afraid the Hsing Sect might actually know of some heretical method to impregnate a man, so he quickly took back his words and shut his lips before they caused more havoc.

“Well, don’t we look lively?” Shen Liangsheng glanced at him before flipping them over, pinning the man down again. “Let’s continue, shall we?”

Thus, the lust and passion returned and did not ebb till the sun rose.

Ch’in Ching wanted nothing more than to hit the sack, but the now soft intruder was still inside him keeping what must have been a pool of thick cum clogged up.

“Could you pull out first?”

He negotiated good-heartedly, but the man circled his arms around him and forced him to abandon his request with a curt reply.

“Sleep with it.”

Oh goodness gracious. Ch’in Ching sighed, annoyed, but the exhaustion hit him, and he really fell asleep like that.

Right before he slipped into his dreams, he heard the man speak. “I have matters to deal with for the next two months, so I likely won’t have time to come. You shouldn’t wait.”

“Mhm.” Ch’in Ching managed in acknowledgment. Then it faintly occurred to him.

Oh, there’s only two months left.

Then he fell into slumber.

XV

Since he knew the exact date of his death, he used to love to count the days when he was young. As he counted, he would wish for intangible time to transform into a tangible almanac. That way he would be able to reach out and flip to that page while no one was looking and rip it out – there were a million, a gazillion pages; nobody would notice one missing page, would they?

But then as time passed and he grew older, one day he no longer wanted to be that time thief.

Even when someone told him there were two months left, and he knew these would be his last two months, he only grunted and went to sleep without seeing a single dream.

Unfortunately, his sound sleep was disturbed. He blinked open his eyes to find Shen Liangsheng standing by the bed, a hazy, white figure in his sleepy vision.

“Ch’in Ching, I’m off,” the man said flatly as he bent over and gave a light pat on his cheek.

Rolled up in quilts with only his head showing, Ch’in Ching looked like a bean sprout in a loosely tucked spring roll. With the gentle slap, his head fell to one side as his mouth went off on a clumsy rant, “Look at the time…why won’t you let me sleep…”

After his mumbling, the man left the bedside and exited with a creak of the door. His eyelids then clashed in battle twice before calling truce and reuniting. This time he had a short, transient dream.

In the dream, the summer sun was dazzling white. In the light was a silhouette, washed pale by the light.

The figure kept retreating farther and farther, but he could still see it even when it became as small as a needle point.

He did not know to whom that silhouette belonged but began to wonder if he was to run after it.

But the next thing he knew, it was gone.

The sky was painted in twilight by the time he awoke again. Ch'in Ching was actually glad that he managed to elude the first day of the year by sleeping. As for his dream, he didn't recall a thing.

On the third day, he received the routine New Year's letter from his *shifu*. In past years he would send him New Year and springtime salutations through the elegantly paced characters of poetry, but this year not only was the letter dense, it was written in a code that only the two of them understood. Ch'in Ching felt agony just looking at the tightly packed chicken scratches.

It took all his effort to translate the page to comprehensible text. A large portion was proper business: arrangements have been made in the imperial court, Huiming-*tashi* would give his aid, and he hoped the plan of helping the boat along the current would work. Finally, the last sentence was a little more personal.

"Hengsu, my son, with you as company, your *shifu's* lifetime was not so lonesome after all."

Look at this old geezer, Ch'in Ching ridiculed silently, calling me his son and then calling himself shifu. The fellow must be senile!

Then he sat before the chicken scratches for the entire night.

When dawn broke, he yawned and rubbed his raw eyes.

Instead of going to bed, he packed a small bag, rented a carriage in town and headed off to Shaolin.

Huiming-*tashi* was a younger fellow disciple of Huisheng-*tashi* who knew about the situation at hand, and when he saw Ch'in Ching he greeted, "Amitābha, you should not have come, Ch'in-shichu."⁹⁵

Despite being on holy ground, Ch'in Ching wore a playful grin. He replied that he knew he should not have come, so he had not told his *shifu* and asked *Tashi* not to tattle.

The two men then locked themselves in a praying room for nearly two hours. Ch'in Ching had said he should not have come

⁹⁵ A title used by monks to refer to people still in the "mortal" world, literally "alms giver."

but still wanted to be a part of his *shifu's* "helping the boat along" plan.

Huiming-*tashi* only listened quietly but in the end gave a nod of agreement. Reciting Amitābha's name once more, he cast his eyes down with prayer beads in hand. "Ch'in-*shichu*, the world is filled with uncountable affinities, and 'tis difficult to let go." He looked back up, his words sharp, his eyes benevolent. "The world is filled with uncountable affinities, but you have let go."

Ch'in Ching rose and replied solemnly, "The words 'let go' have weight in themselves, thus declaring them would become a burden. I only want to thank you for giving consent."

After lingering for several days, Ch'in Ching finally descended the mountain after making all the arrangements.

Meanwhile, the Hsing Sect had long caught wind of Shaolin's recent movements and its substantial increase in defence – suspicious indeed.

"Shen-*hufa*, what do you think about the idea that it's in the Treasure Pagoda? Could it really be?"

The date was approaching, and the deputy leader had gone into isolation for cultivation. Three of the four *t'angchu* were away searching for the lost pages, leaving only Miao Jan and Shen Liangsheng to handle the administration of the sect. Naturally, they had no time to think about other things, so even their references for each other changed.

"That a tree hides in a forest is not far from impossible."

"Well, I think it's a ruse. I bet they want nothing more than for us to run circles around that crummy shrine of theirs and not go elsewhere."

"Is there news from elsewhere?"

"Well, no."

"Only one month remains till the celestial date. Even if it is a ruse, it requires an investigation – and sooner rather than later.

"Do you plan to depart today? Should I accompany you?"

"Elder Fang and Elder Wu should accompany me. I ask that Miao-*t'angchu* stay and care for the sect."

"No kidding? So you're actually not working alone this time?"

Indeed, they agreed it would be business first, but she could not help but tease him. "I guess you know that although your dear little doctor saved you once, he can't always be there to rescue you."

"..." Shen Liangsheng shot her a look before rising and walking out of the hall. Only at the entrance did he reply. "I forgot to mention, *Miao-t'angchu*, we tried the balm. I pass on thanks from the missus."

"..." Miao Jan still had a mouthful of tea, and she didn't know whether to spit it out or swallow it. In the end, she shooed the man away smilingly.

Although the ancient, solemn monasteries of Shaolin certainly were not the crummy shrines that Miao Jan described, the Treasure Pagoda, hidden behind numerous temples and halls, was a two-storey wooden structure that appeared unremarkable. Shen Liangsheng and the two accompanying elders were extremely skilled, and under the cover of night they

advanced with the wind, their shadows blending into one with the air. Not even the finest nets could catch the clear breeze, and thus not a soul was disturbed during their entire journey.

No sign of martial monks near the Treasure Pagoda – perhaps security was only tight on the outside, or perhaps it was a trap.

Only when he had come within thirty feet of the pagoda did he reveal himself, his figure clearly halting in midair rather than touching the ground. This logic-defying ability to freeze in midair was truly supernatural.

The two elders were indeed skilled, but ultimately they did not have the mantra that Shen Liangsheng had. Even had they sensed the danger, they would not have been able to avoid alighting upon the ground. And once they did, the world around them immediately shifted. They couldn't even see the dirt beneath their feet, let alone the wooden pagoda thirty feet away. Up, down, left, right, it was a state of complete chaos, as though P'anku⁹⁶ had never awoken, and the heaven and sky

⁹⁶ The creator of the universe in Chinese mythology.

had never been separated. Everything before them had become “empty.”

And even though Shen Liangsheng had not landed, he, too, was ensnared by the formation. Calm and composed, he did not immediately search for an exit but instead closed his eyes and felt the working of the formation in order to read its structure.

“One spawns two. Two spawns three. Three spawns all things and all beings...”⁹⁷ Very soon, Shen Liangsheng opened his eyes and walked three paces forth. As he expected, a barrage of what seemed like all the blades in the world came flying at him. He remarked unemotionally, “What a death trap.”

Since he was prepared, he had activated his *neikung* as protection. Once, Huisheng-*tashi* had broken through this shield of his and dealt him a deadly blow, but that also sucked the monk dry of a century’s worth of cultivation. The storm of blades seemed boundless, but against his shield they became as lethal as feathers.

⁹⁷ From *Tao Te Ching* by Laozi.

The creator of this formation evidently knew the intruders would not be that easy to repel, and after the blade rain ceased, the next attack was triggered. Metal spawns water, water spawns wood; in one moment, the world seemed to be swallowed in tidal waves, and in the next, huge logs were tumbling towards him. Man had limited power, and when it ran out, he would die in the trap.

Unfortunately for the defenders, Shen Liangsheng was not a normal man. After the second round of fire element attacks, he had a fairly good grasp of the workings of the formation. Not only did he feel confident, he even found it familiar.

“Ch’in Ching...” Once he reached the appraisal, his sword left its sheath, and he leapt not away but straight for the centre of the formation. Even he was surprised at the lack of fury within himself. Instead something unrelated came to mind – it appeared the man hadn’t been completely caught up with that girl and really did learn that book well.

“I wonder what he would have to say this time.” The centre was the crux of the entire formation, and the dangers only

multiplied as he pressed forward, but he still had the luxury to ponder, "Will he let me stick a sword through him again like last time and then say 'lesson learnt,' or will he find some silly excuse for himself?"

"Ch'in Ching, do you really think I'd let this one go as easily as last time? Or do you truly believe I couldn't bear to take your life?" With that, he started to feel his anger rising, but the next moment he recalled what the man had once said – *Let's say a day comes when you and I must face each other over life or death. Surely the one to die would be me while the one to live would be you* – and for some reason it died down just as quickly as it had risen.

"If I knew he would get into such a mess, I would never have left him alone at his medicine hut. I would've taken him back to the sect and entrusted him to Miao Jan, then there wouldn't be any of this!"

Shen Liangsheng had not wanted to take Ch'in Ching back to the sect for his own good – the Hsing Sect was a place easier to enter than to leave; the erstwhile herb retrieval was already

a one-time occurrence – and now that regret had taken root, it meant he had subconsciously made his decision.

The man had predicted correctly. He couldn't bear taking his life for something like this.

The centre was usually the place of security for the creator, so naturally the defence around it would be even more deadly.

Ch'in Ching's formation, however, was quite peculiar. The centre had no more attacks; it was just a peaceful void.

Shen Liangsheng stepped into that tranquil space. The void was not completely black but grey like dusk on an autumn evening. And it was a foggy evening, slightly cool and moist.

A faint silhouette stood in the mist, and it became more defined with every step.

Eventually, it revealed its form.

In that moment, Shen Liangsheng was hit with the realization that it was all written in fate.

And his entire life had been but a prelude to three things – a summer shower, a glimpse of inky reeds, and one man.

For that man's earnest gaze to find him, for his hand to reach towards him, and for the wheels of destiny to fall into place.

"Ch'in Ching." Shen Liangsheng knew his voice harboured no temper or threat and did not expect to scare the man, but after a long time he received no response

He took a few more steps, and only then did he see – Ch'in Ching had never manned the formation himself. What he had seen were just false shapes and mirages.

"He sure disappeared quickly this time..." For once, Shen-hufa couldn't tell if he wanted to frown or smile. He stopped in front of the figure and reached out his left hand. Sure enough, his fingers went right through the shadows without a hint of resistance.

Business was business, and he had to crack the formation. No more delays; he sliced through the figure with his sword. Channelling only a fraction of power through the blade, the mirage shattered into nothing.

With the centre destroyed, the formation was dissolved. The three saw each other again, naturally in a spot about thirty feet away from the pagoda. Shen Liangsheng did not appear very ruffled, but the two elders had a few scratches here and there.

"Greetings, Shen-*shichu*."

The pagoda doors swung open, and Huisheng⁹⁸-*tashi* stepped out alone with a dozen or so monks at attention behind him in what must have been the infamous Eighteen Arhats Formation.

"I am forever indebted to Huisheng-*tashi* for the precious lesson last time." A weapon of destruction in hand, Shen Liangsheng was still so very polite in a way that made the two elders' jaws hurt from clenching them. "It is my fortune in three lifetimes to be able to receive more invaluable knowledge from you again today."

⁹⁸ This is a bug. The author has apparently mixed Huisheng and Huiming up. Either Huisheng died in Ch. 4 and this is Huiming, making the following conversation unreasonable, or Huisheng did not die and Ch. 4 and other details had been written falsely.

"You are too humble, *Shichu*. To be honest with you, the thing you seek is certainly in my hands. Only this item involves matters far greater, and I hope you will refrain from collecting more bloody sins for the sake of the lives under the heaven."

"You overstate your words, *Tashi*. I only wish to retrieve what had been lost, but since you will not permit it, I will have to beg your pardon." As he raised his sword, an aura of death amassed above, crushing the impending dawn. "Let us commence."

XVI

To be frank, this time Shen Liangsheng did not put his entire arsenal to work in the battle between Buddha and Mara. It was not because his mind was lingering on his romantic whims but because the monk had openly announced Shaolin's possession of the pages – this was instead more suspicious.

After a moment of contemplation, he decided against waging full-out war, and the three retreated with no casualty. Afterwards, Shen Liangsheng first wrote to the three travelling *t'angchu* asking them to be even more alert for any information in the *chianghu*, and then he wrote to Miao Jan, retelling what had happened and requesting any available information.

The messenger falcon came and went. Miao Jan seemed certain that it was a trap and wrote, "Those bald mules probably just want to stall us for the next two fortnights, and as long as the celestial date passes, it means victory for them. Should worse come to worst, we can gather the sect and mow down that crummy shrine."

Tucking Miao Jan's letter away, Shen Liangsheng opened another secret message and frowned upon reading its contents. He ordered the two elders to keep a tight watch on this place before heading off to K'aifeng himself.

Although Ch'in Ching had left Shaolin, he never went far. He buried himself in the largest gambling house in K'aifeng, losing and winning, winning and losing. When he grew tired, he went back to the inn to rest and dove right back into the gambling house when he awoke, completely losing track of day and night.

"Letting go" was certainly weighty. Ch'in Ching saw the benevolence in that abbot's eyes but was secretly carrying on a conversation in his head:

"You must know, *Tashi*, that *shifu* of mine actually doesn't have much going for him. His martial arts are perhaps a little better than mine, but his medicine and formation are not. Yet he takes it upon himself to berate me. I drink, and he's there. I roll the dice, and he's there. He wouldn't even let me have a dog when I was a kid. It doesn't get any worse than him.

"But that old geezer is about to die.

"I can't let go, nor do I want to.

"This disciple was never destined to comprehend the benevolence of Buddha in this lifetime."

Ever since he received the final letter from his *shifu*, Ch'in Ching was unable to sit passively by.

He was impelled to do something, anything, no matter how rash, in order to affirm life.

He went to Shaolin and placed a death trap. The hatred within lessened a little, but the anxiety did not abate at all. So he turned to the dice and maintained a decent level of alcohol in his blood stream at all times, planning to spend the rest of his days in this careless way.

One night, Ch'in Ching finally teetered back to the inn at the Hour of the Rat. He fell asleep the moment he fell into the bed but was woken up in the wee hours by his bladder. He opened

his eyes only to see a white figure standing by his bed. Horrified, he thought he was really visited by a ghost.

“Oh... it’s just you, Shen-*hufa*,” he remarked flatly. “I thought you had no time for me.” He eventually recognized the visitor after gathering his composure. He frowned due to the hangover headache, but surprisingly he felt no grudge or sorrow, no hatred or fury. He even had the leisure to muse, *Well, well, this time the white wuch’ang has really come for me.*

Shen Liangsheng did not react verbally or facially but was quite surprised. Had the man actually forgotten what he had done not so long ago? Moreover, this standoffish attitude was rather rare for him, too.

In reality, Ch’in Ching thought the Hsing Sect had already gotten a hold of the pages for which his *shifu* had paid with his life. However, Shen Liangsheng had come looking for him the moment he read the message from spies reporting that Ch’in Ching was “still in K’aifeng Inn” and had received no news from the sect.

Shen Liangsheng didn't speak, and Ch'in Ching remained quiet. After a period of dead silence, Ch'in Ching finally came around and tried to recover from his slightly distant tone earlier. He sat down at the round table in the room and began rubbing his forehead while testing the waters. "You must excuse my bed temper..."

"I'm afraid if I were to excuse you, it wouldn't be about this issue," Shen Liangsheng remarked flatly. "I will give you one chance to explain yourself, Ch'in-*taifu*."

Ch'in Ching's mouth opened, but nothing came out. He had planned for a reunion where the truth, that he was the vessel, had been uncovered rendering his life more than precious. In that case, the man would have not been able to make him pay for the formation at Shaolin. However, he had never considered what to do in a situation like this.

The man did not know yet, and he himself could not reveal it. Indeed, he had to die sooner or later, but he could not for the love of all things die now. This man, the veritable reincarnation

of Mara, was likely still angry about all this, so he had to figure out how he was supposed to resolve that anger and not get a sword through the heart.

“My *shifu* ranges far and wide, and someone asked for a favour. He was too busy to do it himself, so he put my name forth for a formation. What could I do…” Ch’in Ching squeezed an excuse out. “Every time my heartache came, I’d be practically half dead. My *shifu* was afraid that I would die, so he took me to Shaolin and even made a realized monk take me as a layman disciple. So I had to return this favour…” By the end of it, even Ch’in Ching felt the strength of his words depleting, so he abandoned that tactic and instead rose and clung to Shen Liangsheng by the waist, crooning against his chest, “Shen-*hufa*, Shen-*hufa*, I know I was wrong. Don’t be upset at me, all right?”

Shen Liangsheng still had not spoken, but seeing that the man did not push him away, Ch’in Ching continued his shameless embrace.

It was a familiar one. He could feel through the man's clothes a temperature that faintly caressed him. An aroma of incense hovered in the air about his nostrils, one that he had smelled many times before.

As he continued to hug him, Ch'in Ching found the anxiety that had loomed over him all these days ebbing, replaced by an indescribable longing mixed with an even more inexplicable sense of absurdity.

He was supposed to hate, and once he had done just that. But his hatred for the Hsing Sect would slide away furtively whenever it came to Shen Liangsheng. In the end, it was this man who made him feel warm in his embrace, like sleeping soundly beside a furnace in the dead of winter when plums blossom.

"So, Shen Liangsheng, this is how it feels to hold you."

"..."

"It's been so long. I'd almost forgotten."

"It's only been a month or so."

Shen Liangsheng finally spoke, and naturally it was in that cool tone of his. His hands, however, crept around Ch'in Ching's waist and eased the man a little closer to him. His words were of no importance, and it no longer sounded as if he had come to demand a confession but rather like he had come to catch up and share words of comfort and longing,

"Could I hold you for a bit longer?" Ch'in Ching breathed, his nose nuzzling the man's chin. "Only like this do I really feel how much I've missed you."

"I also feel how much you've missed me after reading the intentions to trap and kill in that formation."

"I didn't know it would be you." Although Shen Liangsheng returned to the topic, Ch'in Ching was unafraid now that he was sure that the man would do nothing to him. "Besides, I know very well your capabilities. Even if it could trap a god, it couldn't trap you."

"What capabilities?" Shen Liangsheng dipped down and planted a kiss on his nose. "What do you know other than my capabilities in bed?"

"Those are the only ones I care about." There was one thing Ch'in Ching could always do, and that was beat the other person in vulgarity. After the joke, he added, "But I really do miss you."

"I thought you could only feel it while hugging me?"

"No, I do all the time," Ch'in Ching continued his jest.

"Especially when I..."

"Especially when you what?"

"Don't pretend like you don't know."

"Why would I know?"

"Especially when I lie in bed at night..." he whispered in the man's ear. "The front...and the back, both miss you like crazy."

After getting tangled in verbal sparring with the doctor, Shen Liangsheng had to admit he had no way to deal with this

slippery little fish that just would not stay on the chopping board.

“Ch’in Ching, I’ll let this one slide, but if you ever…”

“I promise it will never happen again.” Ch’in Ching quickly took the opportunity handed to him and put on a solemn expression.

Shen Liangsheng glanced at him and said, “Well, aren’t you something?”

“Huh?” Ch’in Ching was lost.

“I haven’t done anything yet.” Shen Liangsheng let go of his waist and patted him on the face with one hand and slid down to his groin with the other. “So what’s this here?”

Having awakened in the middle of the night, Ch’in Ching was wearing only his underclothes, and his slightly hard member had nowhere to hide. It wasn’t because looking at Shen Liangsheng’s face turned him on but because he had been holding it in for quite some time now.

He had been focused on calming the man's wrath, and now that the wrath was gone, his biological urge was back. He brushed away the man's hands and pronounced rashly, "I do want to do it, but please excuse me while I visit the toilet."

"You can go after." Shen Liangsheng went straight for his underpants and pushed them down to the knees. While stroking the man, he moistened his other fingers in the pot of cold tea and inserted them into Ch'in Ching. After a quick spread, he took out his own rock-hard erection and slowly guided it in.

The truth behind that one time he forced his way in was that he had also forced his own erection by directing his *ch'i* to his manhood, all because of some discontent. This time, however, his member had swelled up rapidly as he jerked the man off and poked his fingers in a little, so rapidly that Shen Liangsheng could not help but ridicule himself in silence. *Well, aren't you also something?*

And it wasn't directed only at this affair. It was more at that time in the formation. A bystander would have seen zero

hesitation as the blade shattered the mirage, but Shen Liangsheng himself knew very well that even though it was a false image, his strike had faltered, if just for a fraction of a moment.

It turned out he had already fallen in this deeply.

“Uhn...” Ch’in Ching grunted at the dull pain from behind but even more at the discomfort in his groin. He was truly in need of a toilet but also in need of release. This was a feeling he could not begin to describe.

It was the first time they had done it standing upright. Ch’in Ching’s legs were not spread very widely, and Shen Liangsheng could derive some pleasure in this position simply from being held so tightly by the canal.

After giving the doctor some time to acclimate, Shen Liangsheng began with a slow pace that was not too forceful. Ch’in Ching could still stand on his feet, but his erection was suffering more and more.

The *hufa*'s left hand had never let go of his pained member, and he treated it unlike ever before, kneading and pulling rather roughly. Ch'in Ching was torn between pain and pleasure, and he somehow came to recognize the unspeakable bliss of holding it in even though the discomfort was strong. His member seemed overly eager to release itself because of the impending gush of urine, and the tiny slit was bombarded with the feeling he would usually get right before an orgasm – itchy and hot. Moans escaped his mouth before he realized their location and forced them down.

The lodging was only an average inn. The room was not very large, and the walls were flimsy, too. At this peaceful hour, any more loud sounds would likely raise the neighbours' awareness, dissuading Ch'in Ching from anything indecent.

And Shen Liangsheng knew his concerns. He suddenly changed his thrusting, only inserting a good half of his manhood so that the head struck right against that sensitive nub, gently rubbing, kneading and poking. Ch'in Ching went weak and

would have collapsed had it not been for the *hufa*'s right arm around his waist. He didn't want to make any noises, so he bit down on his lip, trapping the cries and transforming them into muffled, pitiful moans.

"Hearing you like this really makes me want to hurt you," Shen Liangsheng leisurely remarked before resuming his full thrust. He didn't let that nub go unscathed and made sure to scrape against it every time he entered. His hand sped up as well, and after a few dozen strokes, he felt the man shudder, and two white globs visibly shot out far into the dark room. The member did not fall limp, however, and more thick cum gushed out from the small slit and dribbled down the length, wetting Shen Liangsheng's hand.

"Look at all this. You mustn't be satisfied with one climax." Indeed, the *hufa* was not going to let him off the hook easily. Without giving the man time to rest, he began stroking the erection at full speed again while his hips rocked even more intensely, knocking Ch'in Ching off balance. The doctor fell

forward and had to catch himself on the table. His muffled sobs heightened, sounding even more enticing than unobstructed cries.

A hundred or so thrusts later, Shen Liangsheng noticed his arms propped on the table and so let go of his waist. His left hand remained on his manhood, stroking, while his right slid to his abdomen where he found a slight bump where it should have been flat, due to a full bladder. He pressed on it lightly.

“No...” Ch’in Ching felt a pang, but his member felt a hint of pleasure. It jerked a few times, evidently reaching release.

Shen Liangsheng cocked a brow and asked in his ear, “So soon?” But his hand continued to stroke the member with the sticky fluid, scratching the slit from time to time and preventing it from becoming soft even though it had already come twice. It could only stay standing, trembling, and allow the *hufa* do as he pleased.

Ch’in Ching really thought he was dying. Pleasure never stopped welling up from the two spots below, and what was more, the

man's hand never left his abdomen. It gently caressed at times and pressed down harshly at others. Warning signals shot up to his brain along with streams of ecstasy, and he felt the back of his head throbbing with the need to climax and to relieve his bladder at the same time. In the end, he lost all recognition and comprehension as he came again and again. Traces of blood seeped from his bottom lip, but he didn't feel anything.

Then after another stick of incense's time, Shen Liangsheng decided the doctor had reached his limits, since the member would not get hard no matter how he played with it, a soft lump lying pitifully in his hand. The man's legs were a white, sticky mess.

"I...I really can't...no more... Just hurry up, please I'm begging..." Ch'in Ching took advantage of the slight pause to squeeze out his plea, but no sooner had he finished than the thrust resumed. The hand on his tummy worked more roughly than before, too. He no longer had it in him to care about the neighbours, and he pleaded in a husky, cracked voice.

“No…don’t…begging you…”

“I can’t…really can’t hold it…I’m begging you, stop…”

“Shen…I’m begging you…don’t press…”

In the end, Ch’in Ching came to understand that Shen Liangsheng was not going to let him off this time. The man would not be resting until he had stomped on every last shred of his dignity. So all he could do was to turn his head around and make his final plea. “I…I can’t hold it anymore…Please, get the chamber pot underneath the bed…”

Hearing this, however, Shen Liangsheng pulled him up from the table by his hair and sitting down on a chair, sat the doctor on his lap without breaking their connection throughout. This series of movements sent a great deal of pleasure to the head of his member, and he felt his own orgasm approaching.

“Just do it like this.” Shen Liangsheng began thrusting as he spread the man’s legs apart. Holding his limp member in hand, he whispered in his ear, “Let me watch you.”

Moonlight shone in through the intricate wooden window frame onto the ground beside the table. Ch'in Ching's legs dangled in the light, and he could see everything that was happening to him. He couldn't imagine the shame of peeing right in front of the man, but the urge was coming at him like crashing waves and his abdomen felt stretched to its limit. Still, the man's hand kept rubbing and pressing, so his eyes grew red and sobs broke free. "I really can't hold it in... Can you just not look..."

But Shen Liangsheng paid no heed. It wasn't the first time this man had cried in bed, so he only reminded as he rocked against him harshly, "You don't have to hold it in."

"Mmnn...mmn..." The stimulation inside him was so mind-blowing that he moaned through his sobs even though he definitely could not come again. A few drops of something hot leaked out of his slit, but because he absolutely refused to lose control of his own bladder before this man, he stopped the rest from escaping. Unfortunately, his member was still in the *hufa's* hand which gave a few good tugs, destroying his previous

efforts. Screaming, Ch'in Ching was unable to resist and at last lost total control. A hot stream sprang forth and tinkled onto the floor, an orgasm just as much as a loss of a bodily function. His opening shuddered and jerked, and along with the crude scene that Shen Liangsheng somehow found sensual, the *hufa* reached his climax while buried deeply in the man.

"Still crying?"

Seeing that the man was still trembling though without sound, Shen Liangsheng realized the crying had not ceased and slid out from the man's body. He then turned him around to hold him in his arms and planted soft kisses on his eyes. "Don't cry now."

"All right." Ch'in Ching nodded, but the tears just kept trickling out by themselves. There was no more sobbing, only an endless flow that simply continued in silence.

"It's not a big deal or anything," Shen Liangsheng said lightly and apologetically, thinking that he must have bullied

him a little too much this time. "I won't do this again, all right? If you keep crying, I will think I really married a girl."

"All right." Ch'in Ching nodded once again, but the tears still did not stop. He seemed to have been taken aback by his own action. His empty gaze skipped over Shen Liangsheng's shoulders, and his body was stiff like a clay statue.

"..." Shen Liangsheng stayed quiet for a while and then pulled him up to his chest and brushed his hair. "All right, what's the problem here?"

"...I don't know."

Leaning against the man's chest, Ch'in Ching questioned himself. He didn't know what was going on, either.

It was as though the unshed tears of the night in which he had sat in silence until dawn finally came tumbling out and would not be tamed.

But why was it that he could only cry while in this man's embrace?

He really didn't know

“Ch’in Ching…” Eventually, when Shen Liangsheng felt his entire shoulder wet with the doctor’s tears, he pushed the man away slightly and gazed into his eyes. “You crying like this, is it because you think…”

“Huh?” Man wasn’t completely made of water, so gradually the waterworks ebbed on its own. Hearing the *hufa*’s voice trail off in silence, Ch’in Ching composed himself in anticipation.

“Is it because you think I…”

“You what?” It was the first time that Ch’in Ching had ever seen this man be so irresolute. His curiosity was piqued when one sentence seemed to take the man hours to formulate.

“Do you still remember what you asked me that time?” Shen Liangsheng instead changed the focus and asked a question.

“Which time?”

“When we talked about Broken Zither Hills.”

“Uh-huh…” Ch’in Ching replied aloud while guessing the implications, but he was not certain what the man would actually say.

"From now on, be obedient, and don't cause any trouble."

"All right," he agreed half-heartedly while inwardly musing on the fact that Shen-*hufa* was wasting his time warning a man who had no "from now on" to speak of.

"I..." Shen Liangsheng faltered, unable to get "I love you" out of that mouth of his, but he knew he had to say *something* seeing how upset the doctor was. In the end, he took his hand and interlocked their digits and twisted his words around. "If you'll do that, then I will care for you from now on."

The utterance made Ch'in Ching freeze. This was too absurd.

"Shen Liangsheng..."

And perhaps a bit dismal, as well.

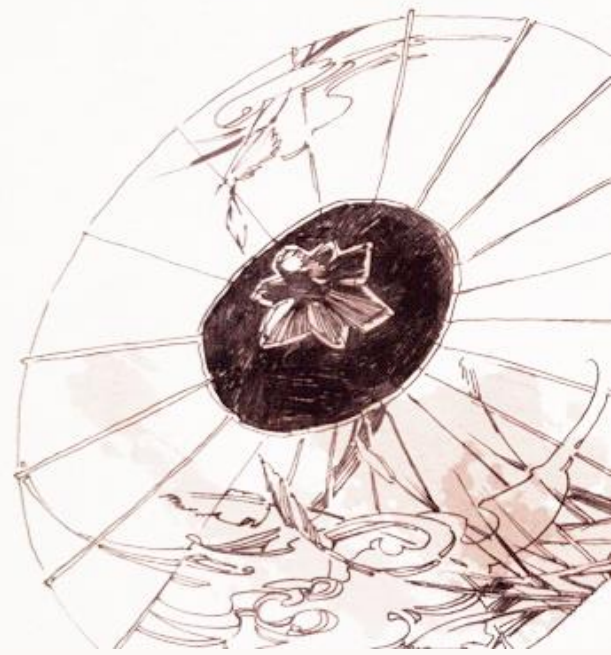
"I love you, Shen Liangsheng."

He felt no gratitude of revenge but nevertheless earnestly locked eyes with the man and enunciated each syllable.

"So forget not your words today."

*After the night is over, when the water lowers and the rocks
appear, I pray that you will recall your every word today.*

*And I pray you will remember forever what you feel in that
moment.*



XVII

By the time Shen Liangsheng got back to his post, they had also just received news from the sect, only two words: return immediately.

When they returned after travelling day and night, Miao Jan greeted them with a beaming expression. "We found it. It's undergoing inspection in the Karyā chamber. I think this is it." The entire entourage listened to her while heading to the chamber.

The Hsing Sect had ransacked the *chianghu* for these pages, but outside the *chianghu* things were rather calm. Although the foreign tribes were eyeing the empire hungrily, the thousand-year solidarity of the Central Plains was enough to stave off any actual inroads. The frontiers were peaceful, and the court appeared harmonious, and there had been no noteworthy event aside from someone filing a petition against the Grand Diviner a

few months ago on the charge of “forming factions for personal gain.”

The Son of Heaven had complete faith in the Taoist arts of *fengshui* and fortune telling and placed a great deal of trust in this Diviner. He turned a blind eye to the petty political infighting and sent investigators after the party under suspicion, but when nothing came back, he let the matter slide.

Then, three months later, another secret petition was filed, this time providing ample evidence supporting its accusations that the Grand Diviner concealed a treasure map of the previous dynasty and harboured ill intent against the court.

The emperor was most afraid of his spot on the throne being threatened, and what with the pathetic national reserve, a treasure map was as good as a free lunch falling from the sky. His interest was immediately piqued. Although the accused denied all allegations, a secret tunnel and room were found in his official residence.

Reminded of the possible “ill intent,” the Son of Heaven was moved to fury. He decided he would rather risk killing the

innocent than letting the guilty go, and thus the Diviner's head tumbled to the ground. Because he had no family, there were no nine branches to extinguish. The only anomaly was that the items confiscated from the secret room vanished into thin air before even reaching the palace – an occurrence so baffling that gods or demons must have been responsible. The Son of Heaven dared not delve more deeply, only opting to calm his nerves by hiring a Taoist priest to perform an appropriate ritual.

The boundaries between court and *chianghu* were clear cut. The political battles were not supposed to involve the Hsing Sect in any way, but after hearing the official had lost his head because of a treasure map, they, too, decided they would rather “kill the innocent than let the guilty go” and sent men to intercept and to retrieve the entire contents of the confiscation.

“I knew those bald mules were up to no good. They didn't have it, but the best they could manage was to set up a ruse to stall us.” After telling the whole story, Miao Jan turned to jest, “To think we'd even searched through the palace treasury twice.

If only we'd thought of searching through the officials' residences too, that would have saved us all this trouble."

Elder Fang and Elder Wu returned a few pleasantries smilingly, and although Shen Liangsheng remained stony, that was his default, so the elders were not surprised. Only Miao Jan took a quick look at the *hufa* and studied his expression. Her speech flowed naturally, but her stomach knotted up.

Although the Emptiness of the Five Skandhas did not originate from Buddhism, it was written in Sanskrit. The physical pages were even more remarkable – blades could not easily damage them, nor could they be disfigured by water or fire.

The moment the train entered the chamber, they were met with the adjutant who reported, "Tests of their material have affirmed their identity. The content still remains for the *hufa* to decipher."

Shen Liangsheng took the pages and, after reading them from start to finish, spared one nod and one utterance, "I implore your patience while I retrieve the full manuscript,"

before leaving. Miao Jan faltered, felt an urge to follow him, but in the end did not move.

Shen Liangsheng had been responsible for the manuscript since the deputy leader had gone into isolation. Once he retrieved it and fitted the missing pages, it became clear it was a perfect match.

Since the item itself was likely real, the next step would be to find the blood trigger. Shen Liangsheng translated word for word the details regarding the vessel, his tone steady and expression calm. Listening on the side, Mian Jan also remained composed.

"The world is a big place; it is a difficult task to find the vessel with nothing but the *patzu*," Elder Fang remarked with a frown. "As for the *huai-meng ts'ao*, we can only wait for the prey to stumble in on its own. I fear it is too late even if we release the information now."

While Shen Liangsheng had hardly been covert about bringing Ch'in Ching to Mount Fut'u, the purpose of the trip was known

only to the deputy leader, who was in isolation, and Miao Jan. Elder Fang and Elder Wu for their part had no idea such a person had ever set foot in their sect.

But even when Elder Fang finished his thoughts, Miao Jan still wore the same expression as though she knew nothing and only looked at Shen Liangsheng like the others.

“’Tis not an issue. I already know the approximate location of this person. It would not do to trouble the two elders who are still tending to their wounds to make the trek once more, but the urgency of this matter begs my immediate departure.” Shen Liangsheng spoke first to the two elders, purposely avoiding Miao Jan’s eyes, before turning to her. “Miao-*t’angchu*, I ask that you write the other three *t’angchu* and request their assistance along my path. This matter allows for no errors.”

She nodded and replied, “Rest assured, Shen-*hufa*.” Then she stood as if rooted to the spot, watching him zip out of the building. Her thoughts didn’t come back to her until his silhouette disappeared at the end of the corridor. He didn’t even

fight. He didn't even flinch. He was so resolute that she couldn't help but admire him.

Shen Liangsheng had never asked Ch'in Ching for the name of his master, not because he had any sort of trust in the doctor but because he had investigated long ago. The result showed that his master had only been a minor character in the *chianghu* who was adept in the Taoist arts. This person later entered the court as an official, Grand Diviner, and could seldom leave the palace. Thus he had little contact with people of the *chianghu*.

Only when Miao Jan revealed the story of page's reacquisition did it fully hit the *hufa* that he had fallen into a trap that the man had laid for him.

The encounter, the rescue, the herb collection, the good-natured displays, all must have been executed with ulterior motives. Even some of the man's words in retrospect sounded a lot like tests to probe the waters.

Only when Shen Liangsheng realized all this, he felt as calm as ever.

It was man's instinct to seek life and avoid death. The man was only trying to find a path to life for himself and so became no different from the others who pleaded for life beneath his sword – he was not special.

If he had to describe his feelings, he would say he distinctly felt his heartbeat. *Badoom badoom* – its regular pace would continue as it had every day in the past and as it would every day for the foreseeable future.

*Chingche*⁹⁹ had passed, and spring was in its early stages. Ch'in Ching had the doors and windows open while he read, the warm breeze gently shuffling the pages. He felt a bit sleepy after bathing in sunshine for a while.

"It really is true what they say, 'sleepy in spring and languid in fall'..." Ch'in Ching was yawning with his head propped on an arm when a hand slid out from behind and held down the fluttering page.

⁹⁹ Early March. The 3rd solar term that signifies the beginning of the spring planting season.

Ch'in Ching stared at the hand instead of turning around.

Slender and strong, white as a lily. Even though an uncountable number of lives had been slain through its agency, under the early spring sun as it lightly touched the paper its grace was equal to that of Buddha's teachings.

Shen Liangsheng stood behind him, silent for an entire pot of tea's time before he spoke softly, "Ch'in Ching, if only you had stayed at Shaolin, you would have had a chance at living."

"If I had stayed, I'm afraid I would have been driven to my death first by the morals and rules being chanted in loops – like 'To save all beings from Hell, it is I who must suffer there,'¹⁰⁰ or 'Benevolence is achieved only through abandoning your own person.' " Ch'in Ching shook his head and brushed the *hufa's* hand away closing the book. Only then did he look around.

"Your so-called chance at living... Do you still remember what I had said long ago? What I desire you will not, or cannot, give me."

"..."

¹⁰⁰ A quote of Kshitigarbha, the bodhisattva of hell-beings.

"Shen-*hufa*, was I wrong then?"

"..."

"Shen Liangsheng, am I wrong now?"

"Then I'll take that as a no." Ch'in Ching rose and took a few steps back. "To be honest, I'm afraid of death, and I'm afraid of pain. Yet, even though I knew I would suffer less if I took my own life, I just wanted to see you one last time, and so I placed one last bet."

"..."

"But only when I see you now do I realize the hardest things to let go in this world are infatuation and wild dreams."

"..."

"I know you're not mute. You've got a sharp tongue, you do." Ch'in Ching smiled. Recovering his usual, reckless expression, he cooed warmly, "Don't be like this, *Ah-Liang*."

"..."

"I willingly exchanged one heart for another..." He took a step forward, gaze locked on the man's, and finished, "and I willingly admit defeat."

Shen Liangsheng held his gaze for a short while but for the first time diverted it before the doctor did. He turned to motion towards the door. "After you."

Without delay, Ch'in Ching stepped towards the door. Falling half a step behind him, Shen Liangsheng stopped when the doctor paused at the door.

"Shen Liangsheng, it is true I've lied about many things to you, but within those lies there must exist some truths."

The *hufa* distinctly felt his heartbeat.

"Besides, at this point there is nothing more I can repay you with, as I've already paid with my life."

Badoom badoom – its pace steady and regular.

"I pray you will not hate me when you think of me in the future."

As it had been every day in the past.

"If you do think of me, that is."

And as it would every day in the foreseeable future

"Once we pass this door, you and I will owe each other nothing and have no more to do with each other."

As soon as he finished, he stepped over the doorsill. Shen Liangsheng followed and stood beside him watching him slowly draw the two sides together.

No sooner had the two panels come to a close than they flew apart. Before he realized it, Ch'in Ching was dragged back into the hut and the doors slammed shut, locking away their own private world for the last time.

One man kissed the other and began wrestling with his tongue, greedily absorbing the warmth from the other. They took turns pushing each other against the door, securing this boundary between life and death.

It should have been the meeting between hatred and resentment, but now it turned into a parting between lovers... Ch'in Ching was able to muse quietly amidst the chaos that

lying brings the most satisfaction only when done to the extreme.

"Shen Liangsheng," Ch'in Ching breathed as he tidied the man's loose strands after they broken apart. "Let me say it one last time."

"..."

"Not to plea for life but simply because I want to do so."

"..."

"I love you."

The doors parted once more. The spring sun was pleasant.

Ch'in Ching took the first step out the door and into blinding sunlight.

This was a trip of vital importance, and he had to prepare for wave after wave of attacks. Bringing someone along with *ch'ingkung* was not the best option, which is why Shen Liangsheng had come alone on horseback. The extra weight of one man did not at all affect the speed of the return trip.

The various sects of the *chianghu* already had their eyes on the Hsing Sect's movements, and now their calculations all pointed to the possibility that the vessel had been discovered. If they allowed it to return to the Hsing Sect, it would only spell disaster for the entire *chianghu*.

It occurred to Ch'in Ching that this was the first time that he had witnessed Shen Liangsheng taking lives.

But then again, the opposition that they encountered mostly aimed their weapons at Ch'in Ching – their goal would be accomplished as long as the blood trigger died; wounding the *hufa* of the Hsing Sect was another story.

The moment he witnessed it with his own eyes, Ch'in Ching found that he was scared. This man, who in the beginning allowed him to be cheeky and clingy and who later joined him in naked joy and pleasure, was in reality a weapon of destruction.

An invisible blast of *ch'i* would unfurl from within him like a tsunami, not sending its opponents flying but simply disintegrating them. Then amidst the snow of flesh and rain of

blood, his sword danced like lightning and thunder, and those who survived the first tidal wave would fall victim to this deadly storm before even a shriek of desperation could be vocalized. In Ch'in Ching's eyes, heaven and earth turned crimson, and the air seemed to be charged with the souls and ghouls of the murdered and their deafening screams. In reality, however, it was only the wind.

The moment he realized his fear of the man, he questioned himself coldly:

And who did you think he was, Ch'in Ching?

"Fear not," Shen Liangsheng reassured in a gentle voice when he noticed the man in his arms was trembling. "I'm here. You will not be troubled."

But those words only made the circumstances feel more absurd to Ch'in Ching.

Shen-hufa, did you lose your brain after killing all those people? Aren't you ensuring my safety now only so you can take me to my death?

But the more absurd it felt, the more affectionate he had to be with his words.

"Shen Liangsheng, as you can see, there are more than enough people who want me dead in this world. But I can only think about my *shifu*, and you."

"..."

"My *shifu* could not protect me, but he was the only one in this world who truly did not want me to die."

"..."

"As for you, you are the only one of all those who want me dead who said he would care for me."

Have you recalled it? The words I prayed you would not forget.

Ch'in Ching felt the embrace around him loosen and then the next moment snap tightly again. He reflected on feeling overjoyed and knew indeed that joy would soon be painfully over.

The horse never once slowed as it cast storm after storm
behind it

And Shen Liangsheng never spoke again, only held him
tightly.

Such a position made it seem as though the man was taking
him, not to the end of his life.

But to the ends of the earth.



XVIII

After a day of intense travel, a *t'angchu* joined forces with them. While Shen Liangsheng was successfully bringing Ch'in Ching back to Mount Fut'u, the *chianghu* seemed to have returned to normal. Most likely they understood the natural advantages of the mountain and the futility of rushing into a siege. It would be wiser to train and prepare for that inevitable, ultimate clash of good and evil.

Five days remained till the celestial date. The vessel had arrived, and although the sect had more than enough resources to guard the man twenty-four hours a day, just to be on the safe side Miao Jan personally tested his blood and evaluated his pulse to formulate a sleeping potion that would knock him out for five days.

"Miss Miao..." Highly trained guards were outside, but only Ch'in Ching and Miao Jan were in the room. Ch'in Ching muttered as he blew on the potion, "Will your formula really

work? I may be unskilled, but I am a doctor nevertheless.

Perhaps I could revise the recipe for you?"

"Cut your bullshit. Short as it is, your life is worth more in gold right now than this old bag of bones. Who would risk harming you?" Miao Jan was blunt but also sounded somewhat endearing like an older family member berating a child. "Also, aren't you supposed to call me 'Auntie Miao' like *Hsiao-Shen*?"

"Come now, don't be beastly. How can you tease me about being in-laws when you can see what he and I have become." Ch'in Ching downed the liquid, lay down and pulled the quilt up to his chin. Then he actually called, "Auntie Miao..."

"What is it?"

"I'm scared of pain. How about you make another potion for me so that I can sleep through the seven days after, too?"

"No can do." Miao Jan knew very well that the vessel must be hung for seven whole days of excruciating pain. She saw how weak and sickly pale he was lying there, and she felt terrible, but she could not agree.

"Is he outside?" Of course, Ch'in Ching wasn't serious with his request and changed the topic. "Could you do me a favour, Auntie Miao, and tell him that I want someone else to guard me. I don't want to see him."

"Don't worry. He doesn't have time to watch you all the time." Then she added comfortingly, "Besides, you're going to fall asleep now, and you won't see him when you're asleep, right?"

"That's true."

"Now, sleep." She noticed he was already drifting away, so she tucked him in and repeated quietly, "You won't see him when you're asleep."

She waited until Ch'in Ching had fallen asleep to leave. Sure enough, Shen Liangsheng was outside, hands clasped behind his back. His expression was impassive than ever, so much so that Miao Jan could no longer read it.

"He's asleep. You may keep watch if you'd like." She knew he had overheard the previous conversation but insisted on

passing on the message. "It's just that he said he doesn't like pain. And he doesn't want to see you."

The man nodded before entering the room anyway. Miao Jan was left there holding an empty bowl thinking to herself, *Ch'in Ching, are you still blind to the obvious? For those words to hurt they must be heard by someone who cares. This man who disregards your life, do you expect him to be affected at all?*

Step by step, Shen Liangsheng approached the bed and looked down at the sleeping man.

A million things seemed to be racing through his mind, but it also seemed to have returned to its initial stage of nothingness.

He grabbed a chair and sat down by the bed, watching Ch'in Ching in silence. He tried to fish out bits of memory from that nothingness but found that all his memories slipped through his fingers like running water, evading capture.

"When you die..." His heartbeat was steady – *badoom badoom* – as rhythmic as a water clock, quietly witnessing the

passage of time with every drip. He whispered to the sleeping man, "...I'll forget you."

The flame of the candle on the bedside table jumped, its flickering light illuminating the doctor's face. A long, shallow scar trailed down from the corner of one eye, as though the man had heard the *hufa's* quiet words and so began to shed tears of heartbreak.

Shen Liangsheng reached out as though to caress his face but stopped an inch away, tracing with a finger in midair the false tear streak while continuing softly,

"What are you crying for... I was just teasing you."

Five days passed in the blink of an eye, and Ch'in Ching awoke according to schedule. The first thing he saw was Shen Liangsheng standing beside him, and he smiled at him without much thought.

Only after the fact did he remember the circumstance he was in, and he smiled again shaking his head.

Miao Jan's potion had placed him in a state of feigned death; thus he felt neither hunger nor thirst despite having consumed nothing for five days. Ch'in Ching left the bed, straightened his clothing and looked up at Shen Liangsheng. Perhaps he should have said something, but he knew not what to say, and so he smiled a third time.

"Time is of the essence, Ch'in Ching. This way please."

Shen Liangsheng looked at him coolly, as if he had reassembled his thoughts in the last five days and transformed himself back into the man of their first encounter: unsmiling with an aura of death, cold-blooded and perfectly rational.

It produced in Ch'in Ching the feeling that their time together was nothing more than a five-day dream.

This is who the man was originally, so this is what I got.
Ch'in Ching ridiculed himself silently as he followed Shen Liangsheng out of his prison. *But it was truly stupid and pathetic of me to think he had also fallen in love.*

The layout of the Hsing Sect was complex and criss-crossed with traps. Tallow torches lit the dim galleries every ten steps. Each sect member standing guard knelt on one knee and bowed when Shen Liangsheng walked by. Ch'in Ching followed behind enjoying the false glory of the situation, as he noticed to his surprise their rising altitude. He had assumed the fiend's body would be hidden deep within an earthen labyrinth, but apparently that was not the case.

After another pot of tea's time, they entered a spacious, empty hall. Ch'in Ching estimated the height to be greater than one hundred feet, for the ceiling was too dark and far to spot.

Shen Liangsheng stopped and turned to Ch'in Ching. The doctor thought the man had words for him to pay attention to, but the man stepped towards him and pulled him up into a bridal carry.

It was not the first time Ch'in Ching had been treated in this way, but it was indeed the first time he felt averse to it. He struggled a bit perhaps to avoid the stony air about the man.

"Don't move," the man ordered in a low voice as he tightened his grip, still standing in the same spot.

So Ch'in Ching could only allow himself to be held, but then came an utterance that was completely unrelated to their present situation:

"You always carry the scent of herbs. I shall remember it."

As Ch'in Ching was getting ready to reply, his head spun and his vision blurred, pushing his words back down. Shen Liangsheng shot into the air thirty feet, bending slightly to tap his toes on the stone wall, which sent him up another thirty feet. He repeated this until they reached solid ground again, and he let Ch'in Ching down.

They were standing on a platform protruding from the wall, and before them was a massive black form, perhaps an iron gate.

Ch'in Ching had barely cracked his lips when the gates opened. From within came a blinding efflux of candlelight, and he shut his eyes against it.

In less time than it took to blink, he felt his hand being held. Shen Liangsheng walked with him past the gate and did not let go until they had entered the chamber.

"I never knew you could escort a prisoner like that. What a fascinating method." The four *t'angchu* and two elders were all present. Miao Jan was the type to joke in any situation, so it was natural that she made fun of Shen Liangsheng.

"Miao-*t'angchu*," someone responded from a corner. "I'm starting to think your tongue may a treasure of this sect. When we run out of money, the two of us should find a teahouse and perform some crosstalk. I bet we would make buckets of gold."

Ch'in Ching turned to the sound, and beside him Shen Liangsheng reported in a deep voice, "Deputy, I have brought the man."

Ch'in Ching took a good look at this man who was rumoured to be more formidable than the *hufa*. He was a slightly chubby, middle-aged man with kind eyes. Far from the leader of a demonic sect, he appeared more like a merchant, particularly one who chose the route of amity.

"Young lad, this must be terrible for you." His tone was as amiable as his appearance. He approached Ch'in Ching and gave him a pat on the shoulder. "Seeing as you didn't get a good result this life, it's better that you walk the path of the Yellow Spring quickly and be reborn into a better life."

"..." Ch'in Ching was at a loss for words. He finally understood where the *hufa* acquired his training in verbal sparring. Fortunately for them, he had little honour or decency to speak of. Any other person would certainly have been shamed to death before he could become the blood trigger.

"Deputy, it is almost time. Shall we light the incense?"

Elder Fang and Elder Wu were conscious of the hour, and when the deputy leader nodded, they took out from a box a stick of incense thick enough to just grab with one hand and planted it in the censer. After lighting it, they respectfully placed the censer atop a meta coffin sitting in the centre of the chamber.

Ch'in Ching had spotted the coffin the instant he entered and recognized it as the place where the fiend was resting his body.

And this stone chamber must have been the highest point in the entirety of the Hsing Sect.

It turned out that the fiend was not hiding underground even when he was in a state of feigned death. He still wanted to look down at this beautiful world from his spot high above, quietly awaiting the day of rebirth when he would assert total dominance over it.

The incense having been lit, the deputy sat cross-legged by the coffin, closed his eyes and began channelling his *ch'i*. The chamber fell silent. All eyes were glued to the coffin and the man. Even Ch'in Ching was curious as to how this soul trigger worked.

While he was observing, eyes squinted, Shen Liangsheng, who had been standing beside him with his hands clasped behind his back, took half a step forward and slightly to the left,

partially blocking the doctor. His left hand reached backwards as well and held onto the doctor's right hand.

Oh, give me a break. Does he not know what time it is? How does he still have the leisure to do this? Ch'in Ching tried to jerk his hand away but to no avail, so he let it be. *If you say he is heartless, how would you explain this stunt? But if you say he does have a heart, how do you expect me to believe you?*

Ch'in Ching naturally could not see his expression. He could only feel the hand around his hand, but even so, the air about the man was dead still. The hands were physically connected, and there was nothing else to it.

The incense was rather thick but burned very quickly. When it came to its end, the meditating man gave a sudden shudder as a strand of red brume rose from the crown of his head. As though guided by the incense smoke, the brume floated upward and circled around a few times before burrowing into the coffin. Instantly, a dazzling red light and a rumbling of thunder exploded from within as if something were trying to break out,

but in the end, it gradually resided due to the lack of the last bit of energy.

“...done,” the deputy managed to make one sound before collapsing to the floor. Although the ceremony did not end his life, he had been depleted of his entire cultivation and would have to resort to living as a common man for the rest of his time.

“I shall take the deputy to his room. I leave the blood trigger to you,” Elder Fang said to Elder Wu as he hefted the unconscious man onto his back and flitted out of the chamber. Elder Wu first put away the censer and then produced another smaller box from his sleeve and approached Ch’in Ching.

“Allow me,” Shen Liangsheng requested flatly. He took one step forward and accepted the box. Still holding Ch’in Ching’s hand, he led him to the coffin.

Above the coffin were two chains. The lower one was approximately twenty feet above from the coffin while the other was a man’s length higher. Two pairs of manacles hung from

each chain, the entire apparatus designed to ensure the proper positioning of the vessel over the coffin.

Without any outside help, Shen Liangsheng firmly delivered Ch'in Ching onto the bottom chain so quickly their figures were a blur. His hands were calm and steady as they first cuffed the doctor's wrists and then his ankles. With that, Ch'in Ching was totally secured with no chance of escape on his own.

"Shen-*hufa*," Miao Jan managed to verbalize after realizing to her dismay Shen Liangsheng's intentions. "I also head the infirmary of this sect. Perhaps I should be responsible for this."

Shen Liangsheng only spat out two cold syllables, "No need." Still standing on the chain, he opened the box and took out a metal tube much thinner than a pinky finger.

Evidently a bloodletting tool, either end of the tube had a diagonal cut and an extremely sharp finish.

Amidst a solemn silence, Shen Liangsheng gazed steadily into Ch'in Ching's eyes and applied force to his hand, stabbing one end into the doctor's chest, inch by inch, into his atrium.

From start to end, the hand gripping the tube did not shake even the slightest. No hesitancy. No wavering.

Ch'in Ching's heart was structured differently, and he would not die even with such an object inside, but the pain was excruciating.

Then when the pain overwhelmed him, his vision blackened and he lost consciousness.

The last thing he saw was the steady of gaze of Shen Liangsheng's eye.

Within them was no emotion, only pure indifference and dead silence.

When Ch'in Ching awoke, the stone chamber was empty and devoid of the previous illumination. Only two candles lit the space, rendering it as dim and eerie as the underworld itself.

The pain in his chest seemed to have ebbed, allowing Ch'in Ching to gather strength to look towards the source of the pain. He saw a continuous flow of scarlet easing ever so slowly to the

other far end of the metal tube before dripping down to the coffin below. The coffin seemed to be alive and drank up every drop of it.

The blood trigger vessel is to be hung for seven days straight... Ch'in Ching reminded himself while not knowing how much time had passed.

Nor how much longer it would be.

He now truly was living to suffer.

He thought back to his early years before he had accepted his fate. He would roll about and throw fits, crying and screaming, whenever the quarterly pain hit.

There was nothing his *shifu* could do except hold the boy's hand and repeat, "Fear not, Ching-er, for I am here. I will be with you."

In the end, however, the sixty-year-old would end up weeping, too. Therefore, as Ch'in Ching grew older, he would bear with the pain stoically no matter how unbearable it became, and he never shed another tear.

Shifu...*thankfully you're not seeing this right now. If you were, I can't fathom how your heart must ache.* Ch'in Ching pondered silently. As he did so, the pain seemed to go away just a little bit.

Only the hearts of those who love you wholeheartedly would ache for you. Ch'in Ching struggled to look up towards one corner of the chamber. The voice continued quietly. *But this man's heart will not.*

Shen Liangsheng stood in that nook without a sound. Ch'in Ching could not see his face through the darkness, but he thought the man appeared rather like a statue, not speaking, not moving.

It's a crying shame that even though this man's heart won't ache for me... Ch'in Ching wanted to chuckle but did not have the energy to raise his lips, so he continued thinking silently. *...all my tears as an adult have been shed before his eyes.*

Losing consciousness, waking, losing consciousness again, waking again... He lost count of the hours and days and became numb to the pain.

Every time he came to he would look towards that corner.

And Shen Liangsheng would be there every time, as though he had been standing there the entire time he hung there, never leaving for one moment.

"What is the time?"

With the pain in his heart under control, Ch'in Ching felt stronger and spoke to Shen Liangsheng for the first time.

"'Tis the last day."

"Ah...soon then." Ch'in Ching exhaled in relief that the days of suffering were coming to an end. As a result, his mood lightened as well, enough for him to joke with the other man.

"Say...you have not been standing there all this while...have you? Escape is futile even if I grew a pair of wings..."

"Ch'in Ching."

Shen Liangsheng stepped out of his dark corner for the first time and approached the metal coffin. Looking up at the hanging man, he enunciated each word slowly,

"After you die, I will live on."

"..."

"Every bit of pain you suffer now was given unto you by me."

"..."

"And I have witnessed it with my very eyes and memorized every bit of it."

"..."

"From this day on, I shall remember it every day and dream of it every night."

"..."

"So that I may live in pain every single day for the rest of my life."

So that's how it is...

Ch'in Ching looked into the man's eyes and saw what he had always seen. Within them was no emotion, only pure indifference and dead silence.

His heart seemed to rumble and crack, after which all that was left in it was devastation and barrenness.

Ch'in Ching realized the indifference and silence in his eyes were not for him.

But for the rest of his life.

XIX

The dim chamber fell silent.

Ch'in Ching spoke no more, only bowing his head as though he had lost consciousness again.

Some four hours later, the gates to the chamber were suddenly pushed open. In walked the two Elders and four *t'angchu*. Without any apparent cause, all the candles in the chamber relit, making it as bright as day.

Miao Jan walked close to Shen Liangsheng and asked quietly, "*Hsiao*-Shen, how are you holding up?"

For the past seven days, Shen Liangsheng had cast his duties aside and stood there without eating or drinking. Although she knew his foundations were strong, she was nevertheless concerned because at the end of the day, he was a man.

"Not an issue." He gave a slight nod, his eyes still glued to the man imprisoned by the chains.

...*take a good look then, because you won't get much longer anyway unless you want to hold on to his corpse for the rest of your life.*

Miao Jan heaved a silent sigh and held her tongue.

Actually, Ch'in Ching had not lost consciousness.

Even if he had, he would have roused in the last moment.

After all this time, the moment he had awaited had inexorably come.

The seeds of *hetu* that had been planted deeply in his veins were awakening and soon would yield the fruits of *vipaka*.

"But Shen Liangsheng, did you know..."

The moment he noticed the unrest in his veins, without a care for the others in the chamber he blurted out his answer.

"What I truly desired was never your heart."

As soon as the last syllable faded, a golden glow beamed down from the heavens.

Word by word, Ch'in Ching activated the Buddhist mantra which he had memorized since childhood and which had long ago merged into his veins.

The golden, holy light grew increasingly stronger and enveloped the coffin in the centre and the person hanging above it.

"No!" The two elders reacted first and flung their weapons out at Ch'in Ching at top speed, but the pure light of Buddha quietly rendered them into fine dust.

A chilling shriek sounded from the coffin but only lasted a mere instant, the golden rays vanishing as well.

Six people rushed towards the coffin, eager to assess the situation. Only Shen Liangsheng leapt up, shattering the metal chains with his *ch'i* and catching the man that fell straight into his arms.

The Mantra of Extermination. Every word required flesh and blood in exchange for its power. With each word uttered, the body withered a little more.

Shen Liangsheng witnessed with his very eyes the incredible speed with which the man grew weak and old amidst the holy light.

Black silk into white fibres, green youth into grey bones.

'Twas but a moment or two.

What fell into his embrace had already become a dessicated corpse.

"I was wrong...this is truly the last time."

One knee on the ground, Shen Liangsheng held the man in his last moments. His mind was empty. He gazed at the face now devoid of flesh and blood, no more than a dried layer of skin stretched over bones. He listened as a hoarse, ancient voice spoke three final words to him:

"I love you."

“NO!”

Meanwhile, the creature in the coffin had clearly been extinguished. Although a human shape had formed, it would be impossible for it to live.

The two elders were filled with fury and hatred, thinking Shen Liangsheng had betrayed the sect, and instantly charged at the *hufa*.

Miao Jan was naturally shocked as well but had some composure left. Immediately, she cried out and dashed forth to receive the blows of the two elders. Blood spewed out violently from her mouth.

“My Elders, this isn’t what it…” Miao Jan had no time to rechannel her *ch’i* as she struggled to calm the enraged elders while coughing up blood. But she noticed that everyone was looking at a spot behind her, so she turned around without much thought.

She saw Shen Liangsheng rise with the dried corpse in his arms, his face as still as backwater.

Then the next thing she knew, all the flames in the chamber dimmed. It was Shen Liangsheng channelling his entire reservoir of *ch'i*, an amount capable of obliterating mountains and flipping the sea, straight into the corpse, instantaneously sending it in the air as a cloud of dust.

Such a ruthless action stupefied every person present so much that they momentarily forgot about the issue of betrayal.

While the shock had not worn off, Shen Liangsheng walked toward the gates, through the air now filled with ash.

Step by step, until he collapsed quietly to the ground.

Despite his strong foundations, standing for seven days in addition to triggering his core *ch'i* caused damage to his essence.

When Shen Liangsheng awoke, two days had passed. He was not in prison but lying in his own bed.

"There you are." Miao Jan was sitting at the table but heard the noise. She came up close and explained straightforwardly,

"I have told the others about it, beginning to end. The crime of betraying the sect will not be mentioned again."

"..."

"Maybe not all of them believe it, but so what?" Miao Jan rambled on while Shen Liangsheng rose and dressed. "The deputy has lost all his cultivation, and the federation has gathered at the foot of the mountain. I imagine they've found a way to get past our defence formations during the past two days. Believing you will defend the sect to the death before the final battle is better than believing you really are a traitor."

"..."

"Well, I'm just glad you woke up. I still have patrol tonight. You get some more rest, all right?"

With that, she turned to leave but saw that the man was following her. She frowned at him. "Just where are you going? *Hsiao-Shen*, can you stop making me worry so much already?"

Only after a pause did Shen Liangsheng speak, in a tone that actually seemed lost. "Auntie Miao, let me stay with you for a bit."

Miao Jan then felt the urge to cry, but her tears had dried up many years ago. In the end, she reached up and patted his head as she had in his childhood, gently replying, "Then come with Auntie on patrol. We'll keep each other company for a bit."

It was patrol, but there was nothing to do. The federation used to be fearful of the combined power of the deputy leader and the *hufa* of the Hsing Sect, but now that they had certain victory, they were not going to rush into things. Mount Fut'u was a treacherous natural barrier that made a night invasion unwise. Thus, that evening was unusually tranquil.

Shen Liangsheng strolled alongside Miao Jan, taciturnly.

It was Miao Jan who broke the silence and continued the previous topic. "Perhaps I should not say this, but *Hsiao*-Shen, you should think twice about defending the sect to the death."

"..."

"The two elders will certainly do so. The other *t'angchu* and adjutant...I doubt they can escape even if they won't defend to the death."

"..."

"But if you do want to leave, your success is likely. You think about it some more."

"Auntie Miao," Shen Liangsheng answered. "I shall protect you in battle tomorrow."

"Thank you for your kind offer." She smiled and shook her head at the *déjà vu*. "*Hsiao*-Shen, do you remember the man I told you about?"

"...I do."

"He said all those years ago that he would rather die than see me again, but this New Year's I couldn't help but sneak a glimpse at him."

"..."

"He's still alive, with children and grandchildren and a big happy family."

"..."

"His oldest grandson looks a lot like him. He was even around the same age as he was when we..." Miao Jan paused, her smile deepening as though she thought of something

entertaining. "I thought, how interesting, and lingered around the kid a little longer than usual."

"..."

"And guess what?" Miao Jan burst out giggling. "He came over to me, blushing, and asked me if I was lost."

"..."

"It was New Year's, for crying out loud. Everyone on the street was rushing off to the market. Why would any girl be lost? He obviously had some other motive."

"..."

"But even his clumsy greeting was exactly the same as the one his grandfather had used."

"..."

"And that's when Auntie Miao felt..." Sighing, Miao Jan smiled at Shen Liangsheng. "That I've lived for far too long."

"..."

"*Hsiao*-Shen, don't concern yourself with me tomorrow. I won't concern myself with you, either. It's all up to you."

They resumed walking in silence, but after a while Miao Jan halted, produced a potpourri sachet from her sleeve and passed it to Shen Liangsheng.

"I thought about it, and I think you should have this."

"..."

"I think you know very well what is inside."

"..."

"Do you truly hate him so?"

"..."

"Just take it. Things have already become like this. You feel how you feel. Don't cause any more pain for yourself."

Shen Liangsheng accepted the sachet. Light, almost weightless, it seemed empty.

"It is nearly the Hour of the Rat. Your essence has not fully recovered, so you'd better get some rest."

With that, Miao Jan continued on. Shen Liangsheng turned around as advised, but instead of returning to his room he headed for the peak of Mount Fut'u.

On the mountain where fire grows is the meng ts'ao which is red in colour and shrinks into the earth by day, coming forth at night. Its alternative name is huai-meng.

"Legend says that holding it enables one to dream of what is on one's mind. Maybe you should pick one and try it for yourself, Shen-hufa."

"I have naught on my mind."

His response that day seemed to echo in his ears. Only, his former self never would have thought that one day he would go and pick a stalk.

That he would want to dream.

To see exactly what was on his mind.

Shen Liangsheng caught the fragrance of osmanthus. Many fortnights remained till autumn, but the year-round osmanthus in the corner of the yard had already budded and was exuding a subtle sweetness.

Amidst the aroma, he leisurely ran through a set of sword techniques, returned his weapon to its sheath and immediately caught sight of the man by the window gazing at him over his book. Their eyes met, and the man ducked his head nonchalantly and continued reading the saints' words.

"Ch'in-*taifu*," Shen Liangsheng strode to the window, hands clasped behind his back, and inquired casually, "How many pages have you read in these two hours?"

"Quite a few, naturally," Ch'in Ching quickly answered without looking up from the page. Far from showing self-consciousness, he even fired back a question. "Shen-*hufa*, have you bathed in the medicinal spring today?"

"Was it not Ch'in-*taifu* who suggested that I go in the evening?" Shen Liangsheng raised his brows. "Or is that an invitation to bathe together?"

"Shen-*hufa*, you overthink," the doctor replied almost immediately, but his expression was not quite right. Though his head was still facing down at his book, his ears were slowly but surely turning red.

"Ch'in Ching." The taller man reached over the window sill and closed the book. "No use reading if your heart's not in it."

"And how would Shen-*hufa* know that mine's not?" He finally looked up, and his lips were curved in a delicate arc.

"How would I know?" Shen Liangsheng shot him a look. "For the past two hours, have you been looking at the book or at me?"

"Hah..." Just now he had been flustered by the man's utterance, but now he was like a cooked pig – the boiling water no longer affected him – and he leaned over his desk and lightly slapped Shen Liangsheng's face. "Hey beautiful, you're too modest."

He should know never to spar verbally with this man, someone who would dare run a dye house after learning the names of three colours.

Shen Liangsheng caught the doctor's hand and pulled him over to silence that cheeky mouth of his.

Surreptitiously, the sweet scent of osmanthus burrowed between their lips and lingered on the tip of their tongues, instantly stimulating the taste buds.

For a moment he was lost. He felt an overwhelming sense of contentedness, but that was still not enough. Then he had the most absurd idea – he wanted to ferment this man, whom he was kissing while separated by a window sill, into a bottle of wine with the sweet osmanthus and sip it for the rest of his life.

Ch'in Ching had his torso pulled up against the desk, and soon the edge dug painfully into his waist, and he wiggled in discomfort.

Shen Liangsheng released his lips and hopped in through the window. He pulled the man into his arms and planted kisses all over his face.

“There’s a door for you to use, but you chose to jump through the window – you must be a thief!” Ch’in Ching teased as he giggled from the ticklish advance.

“What in your hut is worth stealing?” Shen Liangsheng began easing towards the bed, his intention blatantly obvious.

“Well, there’s a real live person right here.” Ch’in Ching just didn’t know when to quit. He was pinned down on the bed and still teased in the man’s ear. “So of course you’re stealing him.”

Shen Liangsheng slid a hand under the doctor’s clothes and began to explore.

The summer garments were thin and few in number. He squeezed the man’s nipples through a thin layer of cotton, and it was not long before the adorable nubs hardened and perked up.

"Does it feel good here?" Shen Liangsheng removed the doctor's outer robe and sucked on the nubs over his undershirt. Saliva moistened the cloth, leaving two lewd, dark circles.

"Yeah..." It appeared that Ch'in Ching was successfully aroused as he tugged at his own collar exposing the perky tips. "So kiss it some more."

Shen Liangsheng dipped down and latched onto those two cute things, playing with them. His hand wandered down to the man's groin and as expected found a hardening erection.

"Nnh..." A weak mewl escaped from Ch'in Ching's lips. Perhaps the stimulation of a warm palm around his member was truly phenomenal, for a murmur escaped, too. "I love you, Shen Liangsheng."

"..."

"What's wrong?" Ch'in Ching opened his eyes and looked at the man curiously, wondering why he had stopped.

"Nothing. Do you want more?" He responded smoothly, but actually he was taken by surprise. He knew very well that this man would say anything as long as he was pleased in bed,

and he had heard this "I love you" more than enough times. This time, however, for some odd reason, his heartbeat picked up its pace.

"More..." Naturally, this was the only viable reply since his manhood had just come to full attention under the care of the taller man. Then, as though he recalled their past intimacies and the joy his ass felt, he added quietly, "...and don't forget the back."

"Even if someone's not a beauty, they should still have a little modesty, too." Shen Liangsheng resumed the verbal sparring after composing himself, although his hands did not rest. He quickly stripped the two of them bare and began probing Ch'in Ching's backside and the entrance between the cheeks.

"With a face like that, it's no wonder you don't think anyone else is beautiful." Ch'in Ching pulled a dejected expression as he clung to Shen Liangsheng's arm and grouched, "Anyways, I'm a man, not a woman. You should be satisfied that I've got all the parts in the right places, not thinking badly of my looks."

“Who said I thought badly of you?” The doctor’s actions made him want to laugh, but naturally he did not actually do so. He instead leaned close to his ear and whispered, “Besides, Ch’in-*taifu*, haven’t you heard the expression, ‘a lover always sees a legendary beauty?’ ”

At once, the doctor settled down, and another red flush filled his face. For some reason, in that moment, Shen Liangsheng found the man to be rather good-looking, not just the face but the entire body. He wanted nothing more than to love every bit of him from his silky strands to his toes

As he was thinking this, he slowly planted kisses starting with his brows. He visited those affectionate eyes, those moist lips and that quivering Adam’s apple. He greeted his straight collarbone, his naked chest and those alert nipples. He trailed past his flat abdomen and flicked his tongue in his belly button before sliding downward and licking his pubic hairs. He caressed the member that was as smooth as a virgin’s and sucked its head attentively. He brushed over the soft inner thighs and the swollen sac and carefully moistened the winking opening. He

made his way down those slender legs, past the bony ankles to the toes already curled in arousal.

“Mmnn…Shen Liangsheng…” The kisses made Ch’in Ching lose control, and he kept moaning the man’s name, repeating incoherently, “I love you…”

No. It was not a hallucination. Something was not right here.

When Shen Liangsheng heard that “I love you” again, his heart jumped and sped up even more, accompanied by a peculiar sense of frustration.

He penetrated deeply into the man and shared a long, breathless kiss with him. He rocked against the man at a dizzying pace, but the frustration persisted all the same.

“Ah!” Suddenly, Ch’in Ching was pulled up to a sitting position. The shaft inside him reached an impossible depth and he let out a yelp.

Shen Liangsheng now was face-to-face with the doctor in his arms as he pounded into him. He didn't know how else to ease that feeling, and his brows knitted more and more tightly.

"I love you...*Ah*-Liang...I love you..."

Perhaps Ch'in Ching had detected the taller man's mood and wanted to say something comforting, completely unaware that it was only adding gasoline to the flame.

"Do you really?"

Everything came to a standstill when he heard his own question. The sense of frustration dissipated with his words and was replaced by an inchoate fear.

He finally remembered. This was but a dream.

It was summertime in the dream. They had just met and were already converging in naked honesty.

Time had been reversed. Space had been altered. It was but a delusion.

And what was on his mind was merely the question:

"Do you really love me?"

"I love you, Shen Liangsheng." Sure enough, the man gave him the one answer that he wanted.

With that, black silk became white fibres, and his face was now devoid of flesh and blood, no more than a dried layer of skin stretched over bones.

"I love you, it's true."

No matter how terrifying his face was, those eyes were as sincere and tender as always. With sincerity and tenderness, they confessed their love for him.

"That is good... That alone is enough."

Now, the fear faded, too. No fright, no dread, he held a dried corpse tightly and continued their intimacy in the dream as though his life depended on it.

Perhaps the nights before war were unusually long. When Shen Liangsheng opened his eyes, the sky was still dark and the world tranquil.

Thus he lay, still and quiet, and took out the *meng ts'ao* from his chest pocket and then the sachet.

The potpourri had been removed a long time ago, and the only thing inside was a small handful of flying ash that Miao Jan managed to secure that day. The amount was so pitifully small that the bottom of the sachet could not be fully lined.

Shen Liangsheng stuck a digit inside to collect a few particles, held it against his lip, and licked it clean.

Of course, it had no taste.

Just like that "I truly do love you," it was tangible in his dream but became nothingness when he awoke.

Slowly but surely, dawn broke. Shen Liangsheng rose, dressed, did his hair and opened his door to the final battle of his life.

"Forgive me, Ch'in Ching, for I cannot keep the promise I made."

By the end of the battle, the Hsing Sect had mostly perished or surrendered. Perhaps there were a few who escaped, but they would not post a threat.

The two elders and four *t'angchu* had all died, leaving only Shen Liangsheng. Perhaps he could still escape, but he had no wish to do so.

"Not because I hate you, but because I found out after trying that I cannot."

The radiant sun hung high in the sky, casting rays of heavenly principle. The mounting debt of blood and murder must be repaid.

Covered with wounds, Shen Liangsheng gripped his sword as skilled warriors surrounded him in a momentary deadlock.

As though sensing its owner's intentions, the sword emitted a long, high-pitched shriek.

Not in protest but in heartbreak.

The sword was still crying with sorrow, but its owner smiled.

"You leave me with three words of ambiguity, but I will return three of sincerity."

The summer shower had long ceased. The umbrella painted with inky reeds had long succumbed to the mud. Everything truly from the start had long been predestined.

But had he the power to reverse time, to return to that tiny cosmos, to look into those eyes once again, to hear the man ask him that question...

He would surely smile and tell him:

"Grant me death."

